
Five days of training, five years on... A Travel Advisor's story

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1 Introduction

Personal Travel Planning (PTP) continues to evolve as a travel behaviour change tool. Funding from Transport Scotland, the DfT and support from wider stakeholders has enabled PTP to be delivered in many communities over the last five years across the UK. During this timescale, PTP has evolved, with added emphasis on lower unit costs.

PTP is still often delivered at least in part by Travel Advisors. Often these Travel Advisors come from non-professional backgrounds (or at least non-transport backgrounds) and are recruited from local communities either as paid or volunteer staff. The added value of recruiting and training a team of these people does not appear to have been considered in detail in the past.

Through in-depth interviews with a range of former Travel Advisors, this paper will explore the potential additional benefits of Travel Advisor recruitment and training, how being a member of a PTP team impacted on future employment opportunities, skills development and career path and consider how these benefits can continue to be harnessed as society becomes more reliant on technology to solve its behaviour change needs.

2 Background to this paper

2.1 The changing nature of PTP

Technology has advanced over the past five years. People are now able to access more advanced online journey planning options and Mobility as a Service, a relatively new concept, is being researched with the aim of developing more integrated efficient and sustainable transport systems. In the longer term the role of a human travel advisor may gradually diminish as a result of sustainable transport options being seen as, or more, convenient and easy to use than the private car.

In terms of PTP, provision of personalised travel information using digital options presents an excellent opportunity to deliver that information at a much lower unit cost. Developing tailored information based on home locations, destinations and other relevant data can enable tailored outputs to be created and provision of PTP in this way is increasingly common.

However, in the short term at least, experiences appear to indicate that one-to-one engagement with a potential participant is still important to ensure that support via current digital offers are not 'drowned out' by a busy inbox and that advice and support provided is as relevant as possible to the individual and is acted upon to change behaviour.

Delivery of PTP using a team of Travel Advisors does present a range of opportunities however. i) When tailoring a message to be relevant and engaging to someone who has not spent time considering the pros and cons of their travel habits, a one to one discussion allows aspects of behavioural psychology and related communication styles to be flexibly used and applied to that situation, resulting in a greater level of engagement. ii) a face to face approach generally requires a team, of varying size, to deliver the project. PTP team members require a variety of skills, however, experience shows no specific academic background is required. The main skills needed include good communication skills (particularly listening).

This paper focusses on the second of these points, and considers the 'added value' of PTP delivery via one to one approaches, and considers how these benefits could be harnessed for future PTP programmes using alternative delivery models, such as those with greater emphasis on digital engagement.

2.2 Travel Advisor Training and on-the-job experience

Steer Davies Gleave has delivered PTP projects across the UK and overseas since the late 1990s. These projects have always involved recruitment of teams of individuals to engage with targeted communities whether they be residential, workplace, school or other audience. Through these projects over 200 individuals have been trained as Travel Advisors, Team Leaders, Administrative Support, or Community Engagement Specialists.

Importantly, no formal qualifications are required and experience has shown applicants from a wide range of backgrounds, ranging from young people straight out of school or college, to those of pensionable age wishing to return to work. The diversity of backgrounds is thus huge.

Given this diversity, intensive and flexible training is required and team building is also vital. Each individual takes part in a training course. Over many projects this course has developed but generally lasts around five days, including both practical and theoretical elements. Travel Advisors, Team Leaders and Admin Support, as a rule, all take part in the programme. Training elements include:

- Behaviour change theories
- Transport planning
- Team work
- Organisational skills
- Health and safety
- Equalities and diversity training
- Developing communication skills
- IT skills
- Customer service skills
- Familiarisation with local area
- Local transport options

On the job, individuals continue to be mentored, and also gain their own experience from their day to day work. Project timescales are typically 12 to 16 weeks for a large PTP project, providing adequate time to develop skills.

3 Case studies

3.1 Introduction

Four Travel Advisors were interviewed, with the aim of exploring their recollections of their experiences of employment within a PTP project, their current situation in terms of employment, and any aspects of the PTP experience which they felt had influenced their current situation.

In particular, interviews explored:

1. Were there any additional benefits obtained from the Travel Advisor training or on the job experience over and above simply securing a job at the time?
2. Did experiences as a Travel Advisor impact on future employment opportunities and if so, in what way?
3. What was the recollection of Steer Davies Gleave's Travel Advisor Accreditation Scheme and if this had any impact following the project?
4. Did their experiences of being a Travel Advisor influence their career choice or direction.
5. Did the individuals go on to further develop the skills learnt during the role and if so, in what way?

For those who had continued to work in the transport field, individuals were also asked if any elements of PTP training and experience were still felt to be relevant in today's transport industry. They were

asked how these could be applied in the context of low cost options for delivering travel advice at an individual level.

3.2 Case study 1 – A graduate job

3.2.1 Background

The individual secured a role as a Travel Advisor following completion of an English degree. At the time, she was unsure of her next step in terms of work or study and applied for the role as it sounded interesting and challenging. Though her degree was not transport related, she had an interest in environmental issues and felt clear on the environmental benefits of sustainable transport.

3.2.2 Training and on-the job experience

When asked if she felt the training provided any additional benefits, other than just preparing her for the role, the individual indicated that the training opened her mind to see travel in a more holistic sense and see transport from a wider range of angles such as the role in community development, the local economy and access to opportunities. The training enabled her to see why encouraging sustainable travel adds value and why every trip is important.

She also indicated that the training made her think about her own decision making processes, and why she thought the way she did. It improved her own home life in terms of levels of activity and well-being.

Finally, she indicated that prior to being a member of the PTP team, she felt shy. The communication skills learnt at the training, and developed during the course of the project, enabled her to overcome her shyness and engage in a confident and effective manner.

In terms of the on the job experience, the PTP role gave her the enthusiasm to work in the transport sector. She found she greatly enjoyed connecting with people. Events based activities were something she particularly enjoyed and she had the opportunity to participate in these as part of the PTP programme, complementing door to door engagement. Her experiences of team work were also positive, encouraging her to seek out team roles as her career progressed.

3.2.3 Career Direction and Development

The individual felt that her experiences as a Travel Advisor shaped her career and gave an excellent first step into the transport industry. Her PTP role gave her the level of work experience to secure a place on an Environmental Management Masters course. She did not think she would have been accepted onto the course without the experience she gained from her time as a Travel Advisor.

Since being a Travel Advisor, her career has progressed as follows:

- Delivery of a PTP legacy project;
- Administration role on WorkWise, a programme setting out to remove transport barriers for the unemployed;
- Promotional role for the WorkWise programme;
- Business engagement role; and
- Cycling Development Officer.

She stated that the experience of being a Travel Advisor provided excellent real life experience to draw upon when interviewed for each of these roles, particularly when evidencing problem solving skills.

3.2.4 Relevance today

When asked about PTP's relevance today, she felt that a focus solely on technological solutions would only deliver a limited amount of behaviour change. New solutions will still require marketing, and promotion and 1:1 contact was still felt to be an important element.

These potential new tools and concepts may benefit from the engagement styles developed through PTP to ensure engagement in new ideas and to support cultural change.

She felt PTP was also relevant for new housing developments, as a key change moment.

It was stressed that engagement using personal contact 'hits the equality agenda'. Not everyone has access to a mobile phone or the internet, particularly the elderly, or others who may be in most need of support. The approach also allows effective communication of a range of agendas such as healthy lifestyles and keeping active in later life.

Her concluding remarks were that the experience she's learnt from her role as a cycling development officer is that sometimes the simplest of interventions are the things which cause the biggest change.

3.3 Case study 2 – Re-entering employment

3.3.1 Background

The individual secured a role as a Travel Advisor following periods of unemployment and under-employment.

3.3.2 Training and on-the job experience

He felt that the training and on the job experience improved his ability to communicate with people on a day to day basis. He felt able to deal with challenging circumstances by dealing with unexpected situations when out in the community.

3.3.3 Career Direction and Development

The individual worked as a full time travel advisor on three PTP projects. This reinforced the individual's core belief that having full time employment was important to him and the individual now works on a self-employed basis, as a gardener.

3.3.4 Relevance today

Personally, his training has improved his relationships with those close to him including friends, relatives and those in his work life. He mentioned that in his day to day work he feels much more at ease communicating ideas to clients.

3.4 Case study 3 – Developing customer service skills

3.4.1 Background

When the individual joined the project team as a Senior Travel Advisor, he had recently moved to the area where the project was being delivered. He had spent most of his previous adult career working in other countries, in engineering roles and so didn't come to the role because of a specific interest in transport. He led a car orientated lifestyle and had never used the bus. However, he was interested in the role as Senior Travel Advisor as it provided an opportunity to use his well-developed leadership and administrative skills which were impressive at interview.

3.4.2 Training and on-the job experience

The individual developed his skills including his confidence in speaking with strangers, and his ability to develop a quick rapport with others. The role also provided him with knowledge of the local transport network in his community.

Acting as a Senior Travel Advisor had a large impact on the individual's personal life. From being car dependent, he realised how much money he was wasting. He now lives a car free lifestyle and promotes this to his family and friends.

The individual recalled that, via the training, he gained an appreciation of the importance of health and safety and data protection. Previously his impression was that these were always someone else's responsibility and the training highlighted the important role that all team members play in ensuring health and safety and data protection requirements are met in the workplace.

3.4.3 Career Direction and Development

Since working as a Travel Advisor, the individual has remained in the transport industry and taken the following path:

- He worked as a Travel Advisor, Senior Travel Advisor and Team Leader on three separate PTP projects in the West Midlands, before securing a job with Transport for West Midlands (formerly Centro).
- His first role at Centro was felt to be directly as a result of his PTP experience, working in Coventry's Travel Shop. This role required him to provide travel information and advice to local residents and visitors to the city. Following this, he secured a role at Birmingham's New Street Station Travel Shop, where his role expanded his experience to ticket advice and sales, as well as general travel information.
- This ticketing experience helped the individual secure a role as an administrator, providing tickets to unemployed people participating in Centro's WorkWise scheme. At this time, he also supported wider travel events as part of Centro's wider sustainable transport programmes, attending events where necessary.
- Today, he works within a customer service role within the ticketing delivery team, supporting customers with the wide range of ticketing products available.

The individual felt that his experiences as a Travel Advisor were directly relevant to all these roles. Again he felt the experiences were valuable when being interviewed for new jobs and has used the communication skills developed every day with customers and colleagues in each subsequent role.

The individual has now secured a Customer Service Accreditation Level 3.

3.4.4 Relevance today

The individual stressed that, through his current role, he thinks the opportunity for personal interaction is important. Often customers know that they can get the information via a website or App, however they like the reassurance from a real person.

3.5 Case study 4 – Developing independence

3.5.1 Background

The individual previously owned and ran a fish and chip shop, though at the time she was recruited to the Travel Advisor team, she was not working. Her previous working and personal circumstances had not required her to travel, and she considered herself to be highly dependent on family when travelling anywhere other than between home and her shop.

The individual brought a range of language skills to the Travel Advisor team and, during her interview, expressed determination to improve her independence, develop new skills and re-enter work.

3.5.2 Training and on-the job experience

The individual felt the training had improved her communication skills. Previously in her role as the owner and manager of her chip shop, her communication style was much more of a 'telling' approach. Through the role of Travel Advisor she developed a more collaborative communication style, which she was able to effectively use when speaking with people. The importance of listening was also highlighted to her, and something she felt improved through her time on the project.

She found the experience of working as a team valuable, particularly in terms of working with people from different backgrounds and ages to achieve a common goal.

The individual also had her first experience of using a bicycle, as part of a taster adult cycle training session provided as part of the Travel Advisor training programme.

3.5.3 Career Direction and Development

Since working as a Travel Advisor, the individual has worked as an interviewer for Ipsos Mori and now works as a carer for elderly people in the community. Both roles she feels were secured as a direct result of her experiences as a Travel Advisor for the following reasons:

- The experience significantly improved her level of independence, enabling her not only to have the confidence to travel independently to and from work, but to engage with unfamiliar people, on their terms, on a day to day basis. This independence was vital to performing the role with Ipsos Mori and continues to be vital as she visits individuals in their homes in her current role as a carer.
- Developing listening skills has enabled her to effectively work in the role as a carer for the elderly.

She fully believes she would not have secured these roles without the opportunity to be part of the Travel Advisor team.

4 Discussion

4.1 Benefits

The case studies highlight a range of benefits for those who were trained as Travel Advisors as summarised in Table 1.

Table 1 Summary of benefits of Travel Advisor employment experience

Benefit of Travel Advisor employment experience	Description
Confidence building	Case study interviewees each commented on how their experience of being a Travel Advisor helped improve their confidence.
Improved communication	Each individual highlighted how the experience had improved their ability to communicate, both in terms of highlighting the importance of listening and improved verbal communication styles.
Supporting employability	Three of those interviewed provided feedback to suggest their employability had improved as a result of their experiences gained through PTP. Particular strengths developed included problem solving skills and how to use effective communication skills to deal with unexpected or sensitive scenarios.
Improved health and well-being/quality of life	All former Advisors alluded to wider benefits from their role. This ranged from a dramatic change in travel habits by coming a car free family, improving mental and physical well-being through the active nature of the role, improving independence to enable them to travel and thus work independently, and improved relationships with close friends by improving communication and thus relationships.
Better understanding of local transport options	Those former advisors still working in the transport industry commented on how the experience of being a Travel Advisor and needing to develop a detailed knowledge of the local transport network continued to be useful.
Wider understanding of the role of transport in day to day life	One individual emphasised how the training had highlighted the important role that transport plays in the wider community and how it has impacts on many aspects of life. This helped develop a more holistic view of transport, its shortcomings and the opportunities for it to help tackle issues such as air quality, health, community development and economic problems.

4.2 Impact on career development

The case studies indicated that the Travel Advisor role provided a wide range of transferable skills, in terms of communication, problem solving, and understanding of some important every day work aspects such as health and safety and data protection. These experiences allowed Travel Advisors to use these examples in interviews. The indications are that this assisted these individuals in being successful in interviews and also to be successful in their current jobs.

Actual impacts on career development also seem positive. Two of the case studies indicated taking part in further qualifications related to transportation (an Environmental Masters in one case, and a customer service accreditation in the other), both building on the practical experiences and knowledge gained via the PTP projects on which they worked.

However, following up with ex-Travel Advisors some years after their employment on a PTP project highlighted some challenges with continued career development in the sustainable transport field as a public sector employee due to organisational structures and changes in funding.

One case study participant felt that though there had been opportunity for varied roles at similar levels over the years since being a Travel Advisor, there were limited opportunities for promotion within the public sector. Moving into private sector transport consultancy work was highlighted by them as a potential next step, as many roles within the public sector were felt to be a side step rather than a step up.

Indeed, a number of Travel Advisors have moved into leading consultancies (and in some cases back into the public sector at a more senior level) delivering sustainable transport projects and

programmes. They have developed successful careers and are now involved in influencing travel behaviour change at all levels.

4.3 Future applications

Table 2 considers how the findings from the case studies can be used to shape future PTP projects, in order to maximise the benefits to those trained as Travel Advisers, and to the organisations for whom, they go on to work.

Table 2 Application of case study findings

Application of case study findings	Description
Ensuring those who market any new technologies are trained to be able to use the same communication styles as Travel Advisors where required.	The role of a Travel Advisor is to encourage people to make a change to their travel patterns, and embrace 'new' ideas which may not be classed as the norm. This is still relevant as new technology arrives. It is likely that there is a 'near market' of people who, if approached more directly, would participate in the shared transport economy. Trusted 1:1 advice would clearly explain how to join and use car club, bike share or similar scheme. 1:1 engagement is also likely to encourage those initially less interested in the option to consider it.
Including the valued elements of PTP training in training programmes for those in relevant transport roles.	Roles involving engaging with organisations such as businesses, education or community groups or individuals directly would find the communication skills of a travel advisor useful to establish rapport with new contacts, quickly identify challenges and practical solutions, and deal with negative, challenging or unexpected topics. Ensuring professional training is available for community/volunteer groups who may be used to deliver lower cost PTP engagement would also be valuable to lower cost PTP approaches benefit from previous experience.
Ensuring that any future PTP programmes allow for Travel Advisors to record their personal development through an accreditation programme of some kind.	Some PTP providers offer opportunities for their travel advisors to formally record their learning experiences. Continuing this would provide individuals where working on short term projects, greater confidence when going for new roles that they'd developed truly transferrable skills, improving employability further.
Consideration of how those entering public sector roles have opportunities to continue to develop their skills and have opportunities for progression	Case studies indicated that opportunities for progression to more senior roles were limited within the public sector environment and that moving to the private sector was one possible option. Recent reports from DfT on the lessons learnt from the LSTF programme recommended increased delivery of projects 'in-house' to allow for more flexibility. However, if this is the case, it will be desirable to retain staff with experience (or recruit experienced staff) to ensure that flexible approaches are supported by a grounding of what does and doesn't work. Finding ways to retain and develop good experienced staff would be valuable in achieving this.

5 Conclusions

In conclusion, it can be seen that for those individuals interviewed, the training received and the experiences had, have been highly positive in nature and have had long lasting and wide ranging benefits, from simply improving the ability to effectively communicate with friends and family, to securing roles in the transport industry where these skills are used in a professional context on a day to day basis.

SDG has recruited and trained over 200 individuals since 2012. It is only one of a range of organisations which have delivered large scale PTP programmes across the UK.

Given the volume of large scale PTP projects undertaken in the UK in recent years such as the Smarter Choices, Smarter Places programmes in Scotland and LSTF programme in England, the total volume of individuals who have been provided some kind of similar training will be significant.

It could thus be assumed, with a relative degree of certainty, that many of these individuals have experienced the same or similar benefits in terms of future employment opportunities, and in turn, employers have felt the benefit of the skills their employees developed whilst working on a 'traditional' PTP project

Looking to the future, the need to encourage use of existing and new sustainable travel options remains. , Alternative models of delivery often appear more desirable particularly when offered at a lower cost to a more traditional face to face model. However, this paper highlights a range of benefits to individuals, to the transport industry and society as a whole, arising from involvement in a face to face Personalised Travel Planning project as a Travel Adviser.

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