
Travel Agents

Significant Points

- Many people are attracted to this occupation because of the travel benefits, such as reduced rates for transportation and lodging.
- Applicants with formal training should have the best opportunities to get a job as a travel agent.
- Travel agents who specialize in specific destinations or in certain types of travel or travelers should have the best chance for success.
- Job opportunities and earnings may decline during economic downturns and international crises, when travel plans are likely to be deferred.

Nature of the Work

Travel agents assist travelers by sorting through vast amounts of information to help their clients make the best possible travel arrangements. Travel agents offer advice on destinations and make arrangements for transportation, hotel accommodations, car rentals, and tours for their clients. In addition, resorts and specialty travel groups use travel agents to promote travel packages to their clients.

Travel agents are expected to be able to advise travelers about their destinations, such as the weather conditions, local ordinances and customs, attractions, and exhibitions. For those traveling internationally, agents also provide information on customs regulations, required documents (passports, visas, and certificates of vaccination), travel advisories, and currency exchange rates. In the event of changes in itinerary in the middle of a trip, travel agents intercede on the traveler's behalf to make alternate booking arrangements.

Travel agents use a variety of published and computer-based sources for information on departure and arrival times, fares, quality of hotel accommodations, and group discounts. They may also visit hotels, resorts, and restaurants themselves to evaluate the comfort, cleanliness, and the quality of specific hotels and restaurants so that they can base recommendations on their own experiences or those of colleagues or clients. Many travel agents specialize in specific destinations or regions; others specialize in travel targeted to particular demographic groups, such as senior citizens.

Travel agents who primarily work for tour operators and other travel arrangers may help develop, arrange, and sell the company's own package tours and travel services. They may promote these services, using telemarketing, direct mail, and the Internet. They make presentations to social and special-interest groups, arrange advertising displays, and suggest company-sponsored trips to business managers.

Work environment. Travel agents spend most of their time behind a desk conferring with clients, completing paperwork, contacting airlines and hotels to make travel arrangements, and promoting tours. They also spend a considerable amount of time either on the telephone or on the computer researching travel itineraries or updating reservations and travel documents. Agents sometimes have to face a great deal of pressure during

travel emergencies or when they need to reschedule missed reservations. They are especially busy during peak vacation times, such as summer and holiday travel periods. Many agents, especially those who are self-employed, frequently work more than 40 hours per week, although technology now allows a growing number of agents to work from home.

Training, Other Qualifications, and Advancement

Employers prefer to hire travel agents who have formal training in this field. Superb communication and computer skills are essential for talking with clients and making travel reservations.

Education and training. Most travel agencies prefer applicants who have received training specific to becoming a travel agent. Many vocational schools offer full-time travel agent programs. Travel agent courses also are offered in public adult education programs, online, and in community colleges. These programs teach students about geography, sales, marketing, and travel industry forms and procedures for ticketing and reservations.

A few colleges offer a bachelor's or master's degree in travel and tourism that can benefit prospective agents. Backgrounds in geography, foreign languages, or world history can also be useful for job applicants because they suggest an existing interest in travel and culture, which could help agents develop a rapport with clients.



Travel agents help clients plan personal and business trips.

Projections data from the National Employment Matrix

Occupational Title	SOC Code	Employment, 2008	Projected Employment, 2018	Change, 2008-2018	
				Number	Percent
Travel agents	41-3041	105,300	104,100	-1,200	-1

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

Continuing education is critical for travel agents because the abundance of travel information readily available through the Internet and other sources has resulted in more informed consumers who expect travel agents to be experts in their field.

Other qualifications. Travel agents must be well-organized, accurate, and detail oriented in order to compile information from various sources and to plan and organize travel itineraries. Agents must have excellent communication skills and must be professional and courteous when dealing with travel representatives and clients.

Personal travel experience is an asset because knowledge about a city or foreign country often helps influence a client's travel plans. Business experience or training is important for self-employed agents who run their own business. In addition, computer skills are necessary and essential, because most travel arrangements are now made using the Internet or electronic reservation systems.

Certification and advancement. Some employees start as reservation clerks or receptionists in travel agencies. With experience and some formal training, they can take on greater responsibilities and eventually assume travel agent duties. In agencies with many offices, travel agents may advance to busier offices or to office manager or other managerial positions.

Those who start their own agencies generally have experience in an established agency. These agents must gain formal approval from suppliers or corporations, such as airlines, ship lines, or rail lines, to extend credit on reservations and to ensure payment. The Airlines Reporting Corporation and the International Airlines Travel Agency Network, for example, are the approving bodies for airlines. To gain approval, an agency must be financially sound and employ at least one experienced manager or travel agent.

Employment

Travel agents held about 105,300 jobs in May 2008 and are found in every part of the country. About 76 percent worked for travel arrangement and reservation services with 60 percent in travel agencies. Another 17 percent were self-employed.

Job Outlook

Little or no change in employment is expected over the 2008–18 period. Applicants with formal training should have the best opportunities to get a job as a travel agent. Travel agents who specialize in specific destinations or in certain types of travel or travelers should have the best chance for success.

Employment change. Employment of travel agents is expected to decline by 1 percent over the 2008–18 period. The ease of Internet use and the ready availability of travel and airline Web sites that allow people to research and plan their own trips, make their own reservations, and purchase their own tickets will result in less demand for travel agents for routine travel

arrangements. However, as more travelers take exotic and customized trips, the demand for some of the specialized services offered by travel agents will grow. Additionally, the increasing number of international visitors to the United States represents a growing market for travel agents who organize and sell tours to these international visitors.

Job prospects. Applicants with formal training should have the best opportunities to get a job as a travel agent. Agents who specialize in specific destinations, luxury travel, or particular types of travelers, such as ethnic groups or groups with a special interest or hobby, should have the best chance for success.

The demand for travel agents may decline during economic downturns and international crises, when travel plans are likely to be deferred. Thus, job opportunities for travel agents will fluctuate with changing economic and global conditions. Many openings, though, are expected to occur as agents leave for other occupations or retire.

Earnings

Experience, sales ability, and the size and location of the agency determine the salary of a travel agent. Median annual wages of travel agents were \$30,570 in May 2008. The middle 50 percent earned between \$23,940 and \$38,390. The lowest 10 percent earned less than \$18,770, while the top 10 percent earned more than \$47,860. Median wages in May 2008 for travel agents employed in the travel arrangement and reservation services industry were \$30,470.

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

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

Related Occupations

Travel agents organize and schedule business, educational, or recreational travel or activities. Other workers with similar responsibilities are found in the following occupations:

- Hotel, motel, and resort desk clerks
- Reservation and transportation ticket agents and travel clerks
- Tour guides and escorts
- Travel guides

Sources of Additional Information

For further information on training opportunities, contact:

► American Society of Travel Agents, Education Department,
1101 King St., Suite 200, Alexandria, VA 22314. Internet:

<http://www.asta.org>

The Occupational Information Network (O*NET) provides information on a wide range of occupational characteristics. Links to O*NET appear at the end of the Internet version of this occupational statement, accessible at

<http://www.bls.gov/ooh/ocos124.htm>