



Human Resource Training of Front Office Employees and Change Management in Hospitality Sector during Crisis

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Abstract: This paper examines the impact of human resources training of front office employees on their readiness to deal with the changes made from a crisis (Belias et al., 2021b), in this case of the Covid-19 crisis. Indeed, the literature review has indicated that the Covid-19 measures have resulted in a number of changes on the operation of hotels which brings the need to train the personnel so to learn and apply those changes. In addition to this, this research has proposed a research instrument. This is a combination of RCS (Readiness to Change Scale) with Mapelu & Jumah (2013)'s instrument of assessing the impact of training on hotels. Hence, it is proposed to use this instrument in a future research.


1 INTRODUCTION

Human Resources constitute the most important asset for any tourist business (Rossidis, Belias & Vasiliadis, 2021). This means that it is vital for the tourist industry to keep the human capital in a state of continuous development and improvement through training (García-Lillo et al, 2019). Human resource training is related with the ability of the tourist businesses so to cope with the changing environment that they have to deal with (Rossidis et al, 2021b). This brings the necessity to examine the human resource training in the tourist industry so to cope with the changes brought from the Covid-19 pandemic. This is something recent with limited research (Ngoc Su et al, 2021) which requires attention from both the academics and the practitioners. Hence, the focus of this paper will be to examine the contribution of human resource training in helping the tourist companies to cope with the changes made from the covid-19 pandemic.

Regarding the importance of the research, it should be mentioned that the employees in a tourist business, for example the front office employees in a hotel, ie those who work in services that come in direct contact with the customers-tourists, are the

group of employees that will judge the public perception of the quality of services provided by a hotel, while the back-office employees are also vital so to backup the operations of a tourist business, such as a hotel. This means that it is of the utmost importance to process the data that highlight their contribution to the quality of services and consequently to the competitive advantage (Belias et al, 2019). In addition, it should be noted that the general analysis of this group of employees should be continuous because the data in the workplace is constantly changing (Belias et al., 2020). For example, the Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted the fact that front-line workers are highly exposed to the virus and this creates insecurity among workers. Competitive advantage in this case is judged by the ability of companies to ensure the health of front-line workers (Chen & Eyoun, 2021). When a hotel has secured health measures, then it can reduce, but not eliminate, employee stress and have better performance and therefore be a source of competitive advantage (Wong et al, 2021). Hence this brings the necessity to examine the human resource training of the front office employees so to cope with the changes made from the Covid-19 pandemic. This paper is a literature review which will examine the current

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research findings but also it will indicate how a future research can be developed.

2 THE ROLE OF EMPLOYEE TRAINING DURING A CRISIS: THE CASE OF COVID-19 CRISIS AND HOW IT CONTRIBUTED ON THE NECESSARY CHANGES

The purpose of this section is to highlight how human resource management, especially the training of the personnel, can handle a crisis and the changes coming from a crisis. It should be noted that there are many types of crises that an organization needs to manage and consequently human resource management. Currently this section will focus on studies related to crisis management such as financial crises and health crises. Therefore, the issue of crisis management in general will be discussed, so that the Covid-19 pandemic crisis in particular will be mentioned later in the next subsection.

It is important to refer on the fact that there are many publications concerning employee training during a crisis, with a reference on the financial crises of the past decades (Tyson and Witcher, 1994; Legge, 1995; Vardalier, 2016). Nonetheless, there is a need to discuss how employee training can be effective and contribute on organisational performance during the Covid-19 crisis.

It is important to stress the fact that effective human resource management happens to be able to adapt to changes in the environment of organizations (Rossidis, Belias and Aspridis, 2020) and hence to prepare – by training – the personnel so to cope with the changes brought from a crisis. This is because as a business it is vulnerable to external factors such as financial conditions, HRM must constantly discover its role in order to gain legitimacy and power, but also to empower the personnel (Gudlaugsdóttir & Raddon, 2013). HRM has its roots in the early 20th century when it emerged as a response to the industrial revolution where its purpose was to add value by improving employee-machine collaboration and tackling turnover and productivity problems (Ulrich & Dulebohn, 2015).

At this case the employee training can be a source of creating core competencies during a crisis. Related literature has mentioned the fact that employee training can be an effective tool during a crisis since it is able to keep the morale of the employees high

(Ulrich & Dulebohn, 2015), increase the ability to cope with the negative effects of a crisis (Legge, 1995) and strengthen employee engagement and loyalty during tough times (Vardalier, 2016).

There is a view that employee training was firstly emphasized during the recession of the 1980's where companies understood the value of having a well-trained personnel so to keep them close with the company, help them to understand the goals and objectives of the company and leveraging their skills and abilities (Tyson and Witcher, 1994; Gudlaugsdóttir & Raddon, 2013). Hence a recession is giving the opportunity on employee training to contribute on the company's resilience during a crisis.

The covid-19 crisis has several differences from past crises; Covid-19 is first of all a public health crisis that is by nature very different from the crisis triggered by the global financial crisis. However, it is not the first major public health crisis, hence there was some evidence from past health crises. During the outbreak of the SARS virus at the beginning of the new millennium, Lee and Warner (2005) found that the epidemic had a negative impact on both employment and HRM and that the HR practices, including employee training, adopted by hotels were relatively insignificant in their operation. HRM was mainly involved in cost-cutting activities, but mass layoffs were not widespread, as management sought to adopt other strategies to reduce labour costs without layoffs, where they focused on employee development and training. On the other hand, an Irish study found that there were no dramatic role changes, but that human resource managers gained power in deciding cost-cutting measures to save the company but also training so that the personnel to know how to deal with SARS (Roche & Teague, 2012). In the case of Iceland, Gudlaugsdóttir and Raddon (2013) found two changes in HRM's strategic role during the SARS crisis. First, there was a temporary change of role in HRM's day-to-day operations, shifting to a more focused focus and on training of personnel so to cope with the crisis.

On the case of the Covid-19 crisis, Agrawal, et al (2020) have argued that companies which focused on training the personnel so to resilient with the crisis had a positive impact on their ability to change and adjust into this new situation. An example has been the case of remote work. On some cases the employees were not used working from their computers; hence they had to be trained. This meant that the process of shifting from working in the physical place, which was the offices, to remote working is a change process where its success depended on the ability of the company to train its

personnel so to adjust into this new working environment (Delfino & van der Kolk, 2021).

Besides the ability to cope with the changes on the nature of work, employee training can contribute on other organisational changes. Those include to obtain skills related with personal-communication during the lockdowns, strengthening the emotional strengths so to cope with the psychological effects of the lockdowns and how to handle the side-effects of the Covid-19 crisis and the changes which has brought in effect (Hamouche, 2021).

Overall, past researches have shown that employee training had a positive effect for companies coping with a crisis (Pforr & Hosie, 2008; Gudlaugsdóttir & Raddon, 2013; Vardalier, 2016). In the case of the Covid-19 crisis, it seems that employee training has not only a positive role but a decisive role so to cope with the changes made, where they concern not only the way that companies operate but they go deeper in the personal life of the employees. As indicated from Mao et al (2021), employee training is a HR function which had a payoff during the Covid-19 crisis and it was an important tool so to cope with the necessary changes.

3 THE ROLE OF FRONT OFFICE EMPLOYEE TRAINING ON THE HOSPITALITY SECTOR SO TO COPE WITH THE CHANGES CAUSED FROM THE COVID-19 CRISIS

The Covid-19 pandemic is an ongoing phenomenon, which means that research is limited. From the present research there is the fact that since the hotels are in a state of limited operation or in a state of suspension, this raises important issues in relation to the operation of the human resources management.

It should be noted that in a suspended or restricted mode, the emphasis of the human resources management is mainly on the hotel management being able to keep in touch with the staff. It is a fact that the closure of the hotel / its limited operation means that many front office employees, especially in the front line services, will be on suspension with limited pay. This has detrimental effects on employees' psychology and brings with it the need to empower and empower employees even if they are no longer working through training. These employees will return to their positions and the hotel management will have to show due interest during

this time. This strengthens the connection and commitment of employees in a difficult period for all (Wong et al, 2021).

An important aspect is that human resource management can focus on employee safety in relation to the Covid-19, which brings together change management and training. So even when a hotel is operating, the emphasis is on learning the front office personnel to comply with safeguards as well as monitoring measures (Lai et al, 2020. Smart et al, 2021). Thus, human resource management has an additional responsibility, which is related to ensuring safety at work as well as protecting the health of employees from Covid-19 (Agarwal, 2021).

At this case, it is important to stress the necessity for training the front office personnel because those are employees that have not only suffered from the closure of hotels due of Covid-19, but also from the fact that they are the ones who are coming in close interaction with customers, so they need to know how to keep social distances and protect themselves in such an exposed environment. Therefore the training is able to help the front office employees to cope with the related changes (Marinakou et al, 2021).

In addition, the most recent studies indicate that an important element is the strengthening of the mental endurance of the employees as well as the adaptation to the new working conditions through training. Indeed, it is very important for hotel management to be able to introduce employees to this new work model (Marinakou et al, 2021). At the same time, Wedaningsih et al (2021) refer to the fact that hotel managements should ensure that front office staff do not leave and that there is a positive working climate, which will help them to implement the necessary changes caused from Covid-19 protocols.

In another study, He et al (2020) reported that empirically operated HRM strategy may have a negative effect on employees' fear of the Covid-19 pandemic on hotels. HRM in this period when many hotels are closed or under-operated should focus on the psychological support of front office employees. In fact, the research states that the management of these hotels should focus not only on the existing employees, but also on those who have been suspended, in order to create a positive atmosphere so as to enhance the mental resilience of these employees - whether they work or not.

It should be noted that a number of surveys, eg Vo-Thanh et al, (2020) and Belal (2021) note that human resource management may take actions that it could not do so comfortably when the hotel was in operation. For example, to implement training and development programs of front office employees, in

order to improve the skills of human resources but also to keep the human resources active and to reduce the sense of insecurity they have, but also to stay close to the hotel as a community of people. For this reason, the management of hotels and human resources departments should develop the appropriate leadership style as well as the organizational culture (Belias et al. 2017b, Belias et al. 2018), which should be that of transformational leadership that has a positive implications on change management (Belias et al, 2021, Belias et al., 2017) in order to inspire employees, and be mentally prepared to perform immediately when the hotels reopen so to adjust on the new environment and the changes that have been made (Belias et al., 2020b). Finally, an important aspect of HRM is to ensure the safety of employees in relation to Covid-19. The faithful implementation of safety measures and protocols results in the employee feeling safe but also in practice safe, which certainly enhances their productivity (Koutiva et al., 2019) and ensures a competitive advantage in a difficult period (Belias et al., 2020c), especially when we know that tourists in they are currently looking for hotels to offer them security (Ngoc et al, 2021; Le & Phi, 2021).

4 MEASURING HUMAN RESOURCE TRAINING ON FRONT OFFICE PERSONNEL AND CHANGE MANAGEMENT DURING THE COVID-19 CRISIS

It is important to find ways to measure the effectiveness of the human resource training adopted on hotels so that the personnel and the whole hotel to cope with the needs deriving from the Covid-19 crisis.

At this level is it important to remark that there has not been many researches on this field overall, so there is need to develop a research instrument which will enable the researchers to assess the impact of human resource training on the readiness and the ability of tourist businesses, in this case of the front-office employees so to cope with the changes due of the Covid-19 pandemic. Recent research, such as Rosselló-Nadal (2014) have provided an insight on how the measure the readiness of the HRM on hotels, including the training of staff, so to cope with the changes due of the climate change. However, it is important to mention the note made from Rossidis et

al (2017) that the academia has not yet produced a research framework which will assess the HR readiness to cope with changes, which includes the training of the front office employees

On this aspect, a potential research framework can rely on the work made from Day (2011). More precisely, Day (2011) has produced RCS (Readiness to Change Scale), which is a tool which calculates five variables related with the readiness of tourist organisations to deal with changes. Those are the Precontemplation Scale, Contemplation Scale, Preparation Scale, Action Scale and Maintenance & Relapse Prevention Scale. RCS has been used on the case of examining the level of readiness of the personnel on Welsh hotels so to cope with the changes brough as a result of the turn of the hospitality industry on sustainability. The questionnaire used on this research had a high reliability score (Alpha Cronbach was more than 0,80 on all of the examined variables). Of course the content of the questionnaire can be adjust upon the current situation with the Covid-19 crisis and the changes that it has brought for the front office employees of the hotels.

At this case, RCS can be combined with the instrument of assessing human resourced training developed from Mapelu & Jumah (2013) who have developed an instrument of research which calculates the effectiveness of training in terms of reducing employee turnover and strengthening employee development. Hence, a proposed research is to identify the role of human resource training, especially of the front office employees in terms of its contribution to the readiness of the hospitality sector to change. This means that the Mapelu & Jumah (2013)'s statements used on their instrument will be asses on the impact that they have on each one of RCS's variables.

5 CONCLUSIONS

It is important to mention that there is a not a generic Change Management instrument of research for tourist industry, especially on hospitality sector. Having in mind the fact that hospitality is a sector which continuous changes and this brings the need to develop a research framework so to assess various HRM functions in respect of the readiness of hospitality organisations to cope with such changes. Especially the case of Covid-19 brings the necessity to develop an instrument which will indicate the effectiveness of training on the readiness of the company to deal with changes, especially during the

Covid-19 pandemic. Indeed, the existing literature indicates that there are many researches concerning the financial crises but not on major health crisis, especially on Covid-19. For this reason, this publication makes a recommendation on developing an instrument of research which will help the hotels to understand the value of employee training so to cope with the necessary changes; due of covid-19 but also to indicate how this can happen. Therefore, this means this research instrument would have to be evaluated in an empirical research so to indicate its reliability but also to identify potential changes and modifications to be made.

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