

HR MANAGEMENT CHALLENGES IN THE CONTEXT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: THE CASE OF THE LITHUANIAN HOSPITALITY INDUSTRY

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Abstract: The purpose of the paper is to analyse the challenges of HR management, related to four themes such as workforce burnout and stress, personal safety, job satisfaction, and post-crisis training and development, which have resulted from the Covid-19 pandemic in the hospitality industry in order to increase the level of resilience in the future difficult situation. To achieve the stated goal, a semi-structured interview on HR management experts of Lithuanian hospitality companies has been carried out. The results of the study have enabled the author to detail the HR management challenges (related to highlighted four themes) caused by the Covid-19 pandemic in the Lithuanian hospitality industry and find sub-themes that are potentially relevant directions of future research. These findings can help managers and decisions makers increase the level of resilience of the hospitality company in a difficult situation.

Key words: Human Resources, challenges, hospitality industry, Covid-19, Lithuania

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Introduction

The coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic has had a major and unprecedented impact on the hospitality industry worldwide (Kock et al., 2020; Nicola et al., 2020). International, regional and local travelling restrictions related to the Covid-19 pandemic suppression instantly affected such areas as air transport, cruises, public transport, accommodation, cafes

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and restaurants, conferences and other types of events (Gössling et al., 2020). The hospitality industry was forced to acquire new knowledge, solve numerous problems and, at the same time, to work under new conditions due to these unusual circumstances (Kaushal & Srivastava, 2021). Owners and CEOs of hospitality companies have begun to look for the best ways to handle the problems caused by the pandemic. They need to respond to the challenges and make necessary changes and corresponding strategic steps under these extreme conditions (Alonso et al., 2020).

The research that is discussed in this paper is based on insights by Zopiatis et al. (2021) about relevant research directions in the field of tourism and hospitality in relation to human resource (HR) management (the significance of which was highlighted by the Covid-19 pandemic). The four themes (burnout and stress, personal safety, job satisfaction, and post-crisis training and development) are chosen for the analysis in this paper.

The study “*The Annual State of Human Capital in Lithuania*” (2021), carried out by the *Government Strategic Analysis Centre (STRATA)*, shows that the challenges related to the four themes identified by Zopiatis et al. (2021) hold relevance for the Lithuanian hospitality industry managers and decision makers in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. Results of the above analysis by STRATA (2021) justify the need for a study on four highlighted themes in the Lithuanian hospitality industry:

1. In 2020, the average wage in Lithuania decreased only in the accommodation and catering services sector, which was probably the most affected sector by the Covid-19 pandemic. This highlights the need for an analysis of the challenges related to the theme of employees’ job satisfaction in the Lithuanian hospitality industry.

2. Lower-earning and lower-skilled employees working in the accommodation and catering sector were less likely to have the opportunity to work remotely, due to both the specificities of the job and poorer conditions at home. This caused them to face a higher risk of infection due to direct contact with customers, as well as a higher risk of losing their job and reduced employment opportunities. The need for an analysis about the challenges related to the themes such as burnout and stress and personal safety has increased in the Lithuanian hospitality industry.

3. To ensure greater resilience in the future against possible similar threats, there is a need for an analysis of post-crisis training and development in the Lithuanian hospitality industry.

The aim of the paper is to analyse the challenges of HR management, related to four themes such as workforce burnout and stress, personal

safety, job satisfaction, and post-crisis training and development, which have resulted from the Covid-19 pandemic in the hospitality industry in order to increase the level of resilience in the future difficult situation.

The studies of HR management challenges in the COVID-19 pandemic context in the hospitality industry often provide holistic views through these challenges. They do not demonstrate what the specific aspects of the HR management challenges in the Covid-19 pandemic are. To fill this gap, the present study has adopted a qualitative approach in order to find the characteristics of the individual challenges during the Covid-19 pandemic. This study provides new research opportunities to drive researchers in planning future studies.

1. Theoretical background

The pandemic-caused stress is manifested through vocational, financial and mental perspectives, i.e. tied to being laid-off, changing job responsibilities, financial concerns, increased risk perception, mental stress, and health concerns (Liu-Lastres, 2023b). Because the consequences of the harmful crisis caused by the Covid-19 pandemic in the hospitality industry made employees feel anxious and vulnerable at work, not only due to physical and psychological risks but also due to the need to adapt to continuous changes within a company (Kim et al., 2021). The biggest increase of stress was felt by employees due to poor coordination and communication with colleagues during the Covid-19 pandemic (Tsui, 2021). The Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted the importance of effective internal crisis communication (Liu-Lastres et al., 2023a): employee-employer communication to increase employees' confidence in and commitment to their company (Liu-Lastres et al., 2023b); employee-centered communication generates a sense of psychological safety and reducing turnover intentions (Liu-Lastres, 2023a). Challenges related to stress and burnout that appeared in the hospitality industry caused by the Covid-19 pandemic are important to analyse in order to ensure employees' well-being at work during a crisis, also, according to Kim et al. (2021), to attract prospective employees to the hospitality sector and not to reduce the attractiveness of the industry to them.

The issues of personal safety and job insecurity in the hospitality industry became more important in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic in several aspects. First, the qualitative aspect of job insecurity, perceived

dangers of weakened quality in labour relationships such as reductions in salary and work condition deterioration (Hellgren et al., 1999): a greater number of redundancy cases in the hospitality industry has been noticed in the Covid-19 pandemic time (Kaushal & Srivastava, 2021); employees cannot feel secure as they fear they might be dismissed (Yin & Ni, 2021). Redundancies caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, subjective and different attitudes of still working employees towards such redundancies might have an effect on the psychological state and behaviour of employees who have 'survived' (Tu et al., 2021; Liu-Lastres, 2023b). Another important aspect is insecurity in terms of work related to a negative impact on employees' health (Ferrie, 2001), i.e. in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, job insecurity was related to the potential danger of getting the virus. The staff of the hospitality companies might be anxious about the provision of services to customers because some people infected with Covid-19 might show no symptoms (Yin & Ni, 2021). Therefore, employees' satisfaction with their organisation's response to the Covid-19 pandemic has become important to reduce job insecurity (Vo-Thanh et al., 2021).

The insecurity felt by employees in the hospitality industry includes the fear that the company might be closed due to the Covid-19 pandemic – either temporarily or for good – or changes following the pandemic might negatively affect job satisfaction (Bajrami et al., 2021). Therefore, in the context of the pandemic the hospitality industry faced new challenges in terms of retaining high job satisfaction and level of task fulfilment as well as reducing inefficient work (Nemteanu & Dabija, 2021). It has become clear that leadership plays a major role in shaping the social environment and success and ensuring employees' job satisfaction (Michael & Fotiadis, 2022). This is confirmed by a number of studies on the job satisfaction of hospitality industry employees in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic: how the organisational justice and commitment of employees to the organisation have impact on their satisfaction with work (Ghaderi et al., 2021), how related the organisation's attitude to its employees, the job satisfaction and organisational commitment are (Salem et al., 2021); or what the relationship between the safety of employees and their motivation, satisfaction with work, engagement, good emotional state at work, etc. is (Bajrami et al., 2021; Jung et al., 2021).

Collective efforts among various stakeholders, including governments, practitioners and employees were required to overcome the challenges posed by the Covid-19 pandemic (Park et al., 2022). Another considerable challenge is to collectively learn from the global Covid-19 pandemic to

speed up sustainable transformation of tourism (Gössling et al., 2020), sustainable tourism development (Yang et.al., 2022). The pandemic has made it even more important to better understand and adapt to the uncertainties of industry dynamics (Yang et.al., 2022) and to strengthen the personal resilience of employees to future crises (El-Said et.al., 2023). In other words, it is very important to assess the crisis of the coronavirus pandemic as an opportunity (Giousmpasoglou et al., 2021), because the ability of a company to learn is determined by the extent of its interest in learning from incidents and perhaps its organisational culture (Ritchie, 2004). Salem et al. (2021) draws attention to the fact that it is very important that hotels organise training sessions for employees to improve their skills during the pandemic so they can work effectively after it is over. Digitalization will undoubtedly continue to be important in the future for other health crises as well as improving product range and diversity, and greater digital competencies will be needed in the future (El-Said et.al., 2023). The contactless technologies as well as training on positive thinking, problem-solving, and self-care can help to build employees' resilience for the future crisis (Haldorai et.al., 2023).

The summary of results of selected studies, presented in table 1, was a reference point for the interview.

Table 1
Review summary of relevant studies

| <i>Themes</i> | <i>Challenges caused by the Covid-19 pandemic</i> | <i>Authors</i> |
|--------------------------------------|--|--|
| Burnout/ stress | Stress due to physical, psychological risks and the need to adapt to continuous changes within a company | Kim et al. (2021) |
| | Stress due to poor coordination and communication in a company | Tsui (2021) Liu-Lastres et al. (2023a, 2023b) |
| Personal safety | Necessity of employees' satisfaction with their organisation's response to the Covid-19 pandemic | Vo-Thanh et al. (2021) |
| | Strengthened employees' fear that they might be dismissed | Yin & Ni (2021) Liu-Lastres (2023b) |
| Job satisfaction | Strengthened fear that changes following the pandemic affects job satisfaction (employees are not sure what role they will have in the organization) | Bajrami et al. (2021) |
| | Greater employee job satisfaction and organizational commitment can be achieved by improving perception of organizational support, leadership | Salem et al. (2021) Michael and Fotiadis (2022) |
| Post-crisis training and development | Necessity to develop employees resilience for the future crisis | Haldorai et.al. (2023) El-Said et.al. (2023) |
| | Sustainable transformation of tourism and hospitality industry | Gössling et al. (2020) Yang et.al. (2022) |

Source: elaborated by the author

2. Methodology

The individual semi-structured, in-depth interviews were used to collect data, enabling the researcher to elicit experience, feelings and opinions from respondents (Creswell, 2003). This helps to reach the purpose of the interview - to identify the perceptions of the HR managers on the challenges, related to four themes such as workforce burnout and stress, personal safety, job satisfaction and post-crisis training and development, which have resulted from the Covid-19 pandemic in the Lithuanian hospitality industry.

The sample size in the qualitative research and the features of its scope, in particular, must be appropriate in terms of the set goals. Sample size is more about saturation than representation (Hodges, 2011). Table 2 provides information on the HR management experts (HRM experts) who took part in the survey.

Table 2
Demographic information of interview participants

| <i>HRM experts</i> | <i>Company</i> | <i>Age</i> | <i>Gender</i> | <i>Employment in current job (years)</i> | <i>Total work experience (years)</i> |
|--------------------|-------------------|------------|---------------|--|--------------------------------------|
| HRM expert 1 | Accommodation-spa | 39 | Male | 4 | 16 |
| HRM expert 2 | Accommodation-spa | 52 | Female | 10 | 31 |
| HRM expert 3 | Accommodation-spa | 34 | Male | 3 | 10 |
| HRM expert 4 | Accommodation-spa | 27 | Female | 4 | 6 |
| HRM expert 5 | Catering | 37 | Female | 7 | 15 |
| HRM expert 6 | Catering | 61 | Male | 6 | 39 |
| HRM expert 7 | Catering | 54 | Female | 2 | 33 |
| HRM expert 8 | Catering | 33 | Female | 6 | 10 |
| HRM expert 9 | Accommodation | 39 | Female | 3 | 12 |
| HRM expert 10 | Accommodation | 43 | Female | 7 | 22 |
| HRM expert 11 | Accommodation | 46 | Female | 7 | 28 |
| HRM expert 12 | Accommodation | 28 | Female | 4 | 8 |

Source: elaborated by the author

Below is a list of requirements for the selection of the research participants-experts and the procedures of the survey:

- 1) Experts shall be at least 18 years of age and shall be working in the area of HR management in hospitality companies; experts shall take managing positions in the area of HR management; they shall have

subordinates; they shall have at least 5 years of experience of work in the area of HR management.

- 2) Participants who worked in hospitality companies in Lithuania in the area of HR management during the national quarantine under emergency conditions from 16 March 2020 to 16 June 2020.
- 3) Once potential interviewers agreed to take part in the research, an interview was planned in the *MsTeams* workspace or face-to-face. There was only one interview with one selected expert a day (from 5p.m. to 7 p.m.). Each interview took about 40 minutes. According to Diccico-Bloom and Crabtree (2006), most commonly, the semi-structured interview is only conducted once for an individual or a group and takes between 30 minutes and several hours to complete.
- 4) Interviews were organised in Lithuania after the imposition of the second quarantine due to the increase in Covid-19 cases in the period from 9 November to 13 November 2020; from 1 December to 5 December 2020.

The experts were given 4 themes of questions as follows: HR management challenges related to the workforce burnout/stress, the personal safety, the job satisfaction, the post-crisis training and development in the Covid-19 pandemics context in the Lithuanian hospitality industry. A broader explanation for each theme of the questions (possible lines of answers on challenges caused by the Covid-19 pandemic) based on the result of literature review (Table 1) was given for experts.

Thematic analysis is chosen for this research, because if a theme is present in someone's views it will come out in their interview and be apparent to the researcher (Fugard & Potts, 2015). Thematic analysis is used to interpret the interview data in six steps:

- 1) 12 HRM experts were interviewed and the information was collected into a transcript.
- 2) After the transcript was completed, the overall experts' ideas and comments on the four themes were clarified.
- 3) Each individual transcript was examined and then similarities and differences across the transcripts from HRM experts' tone and wording were identified.
- 4) The description of the analysis was formed into a narrative and summary table in order to describe the results of the study.
- 5) The information on the four themes was categorized into relevant sub-themes.

- 6) The final conclusions, implication and future research were made according to the interview findings and theoretical analysis.

3. Research results

The interviewed experts outlined a few main challenges in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic in relation to employee burnout/stress: conflict situations due to the Covid-19 pandemic restrictions and stressful situations when communicating with foreign customers. In view of HRM Expert 1, *“We faced challenges related to management of conflict situations in unexpected, unforeseen environment as employees had never encountered such conflict situations which resulted from differences in the management of the coronavirus pandemic in different countries, also due to personal attitude of local tourists to the spread of the virus and preventive measures”*. Finding HR management challenges in relation to personal safety revealed that the Covid-19 pandemic made managers answer the question – *“What are the best ways of virtual work organization for employees in the hospitality industry?”* As HRM Expert 5 put it, *“he had worked for 15 years in the hospitality industry and had never worked remotely or had never had to solve problems related to organisation of work from home”*. With regard to employees’ job satisfaction in the Covid-19 pandemic situation, experts of the hospitality industry named the following challenges: job satisfaction related to the increase of employees’ independence and encouragement to making individual decisions. HRM Expert 3 emphasised that *with employees working remotely and making decisions independently, the big challenge for managers is how to manage employees who work remotely (especially, when they had no such experience before)*. When asked about HR management challenges in relation to post-crisis training and development, all experts listed challenges related to digitalisation, automation and new, innovative technology. HRM Expert 12 said that *“there is a big need for new information on robotisation and development of IoT in the hospitality industry, but it comes with the necessity for employees to learn how to work in the new environment, and for the managers – how to make their learning easier”*.

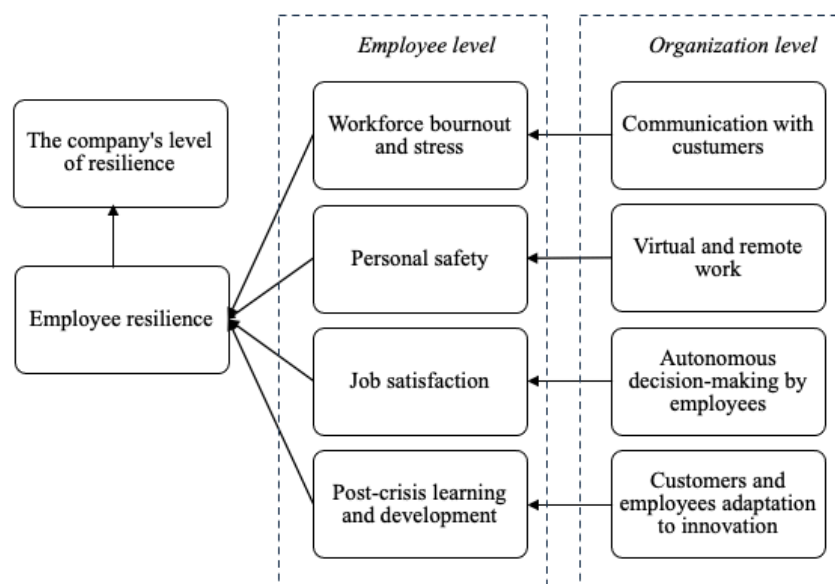
A summary of the experts' responses is presented in Table 3, which shows the sub-themes that emerged.

Table 3
Summary of expert responses

| <i>Themes</i> | <i>Challenges caused by the the Covid-19 pandemic</i> | <i>Sub-theme</i> |
|--------------------------------------|--|--|
| Burnout/ stress | Difficulties for employees in communicating with customers who deny and ignore Covid-19 restrains | Effective communication with customers in unusual situations |
| | Difficulties in communicating with multicultural customers about the requirements of behavior and rules in Covid-19 situation in Lithuania | |
| Personal safety | The reduction of contact places of customers' service (to ensure psychological and physical safety of employees who cannot work remotely) | Virtual and remote work |
| | The creation of virtual work environment for employees | |
| Job satisfaction | The increase of employees' independence, the encouragement to making individual decisions | Autonomous decision-making by employees |
| | The communication with employees in unusual situation | |
| Post-crisis training and development | Innovative management of orders and customers' service (to manage difficulties of customers' adaptation to new improvements) | Customers and employees adaptation to innovation |
| | The automatization of clients' service system | |

Source: elaborated by the author

Based on these identified sub-themes, a model has been developed that presents two sets of factors (at the employee level and at the organisational level) related to the resilience of employees and the company (Figure 1).



Source: elaborated by the author

Figure 1. Summary of the findings

The level of employee resilience in the difficult situation depends on the factors at the employees' level such as burnout and stress, personal safety, job satisfaction, and post-crisis training and development. The proposed model shows how factors at the organization level are identified in this study - communication with customers in unusual situations, virtual and remote work, autonomous decision making by employees, customers and employees' adaptation to innovation - contribute to employees' resilience.

4. Discussion

The analysis of HR management challenges in relation to burnout/stress shows that new, unexpected stressful and conflict situations among employees and customers have arisen, and the importance of effective communication in unusual situations has increased. These results are in line with those obtained in Yin & Ni (2021) that the Covid-19 pandemic impacted on the psychological safety of employees, and in El-Said et.al. (2023) finding on maximizing employees' productivity by creating a flexible and communicative environment. Finding the HR management challenges in relation to personal safety reveals that the Covid-19 pandemic highlights the importance of virtual and remote work. This differs from the results of previous research (Yin & Ni, 2021; Tu et al., 2021; Liu-Lastres, 2023b) that emphasises the strong relationship between employees safety and redundancies. Results of the HR management challenges in relation to job satisfaction confirm the conclusions drawn by Bajrami et al. (2021), and show that the performance of functions of a large number of employees has changed. Working under unusual conditions, such as the Covid-19 pandemic, gives employees more freedom and independence to make decisions, but, it is not clear how greater independence affects the managers' job. Findings of HR management challenges in relation to post-crisis (e-)training and development reveal that the coronavirus pandemic is the reason for many current and future innovative changes in the hospitality industry based on digitalisation and using available digital tools (El-Said et.al., 2023), automation and new, innovative technology. However, employees may feel anxious and vulnerable at work due to the need to adapt to continuous changes within a company (Kim et al., 2021), which is also shown by the results of this study.

Conclusions

The paper analyses the challenges of HR management in relation to four themes such as employee burnout and stress, personal safety, job satisfaction and training and development following the crisis caused by the Covid-19 pandemic in the hospitality industry. The sub-themes in the four themes of HR management challenges are found. The study proposes a model that shows how factors identified in this study (the sub-themes) contribute to the employees' resilience in a difficult situation. These sub-themes expand the field of research on HR management challenges during a crisis in the hospitality industry. Practically, the HR management challenges are included in the four themes in order to cope with them in unusual circumstances in the hospitality industry are given in detail in this study. These findings can help managers and decisions makers to increase the level of resilience of the hospitality company in a difficult situation. Based on the results of the study, practical steps can be identified to increase the level of resilience of hospitality company: to draw up new conflict and communication management rules during a crisis on the basis of experience of the pandemic management; to collect knowledge on the experience of companies of other sectors in terms of organising work remotely, also ensuring maximum safety of employees who have to work directly with customers; to analyse individual attitudes of employees towards the changes caused by unusual situations and how they affect their job satisfaction; to focus on the ways to manage employees' and customers' adaptation to new improvements and digitalisation.

The main limitations of this study can be identified. Quite often, research on HR management is carried out for internal use of companies and in the interest of companies; therefore, surveys are aggravated by the reluctance of employees and their managers, in particular, to make certain information public. The reasons mentioned can sometimes result in misleading and false information. Qualitative research often faces the problem of shortage of appropriate experts: due to low interest, top managers may sometimes delegate other specialists who might not necessarily meet the selection criteria, for this reason, they would not be considered experts.

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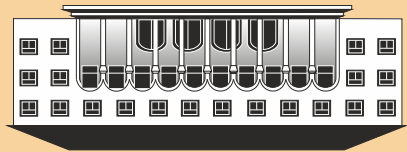
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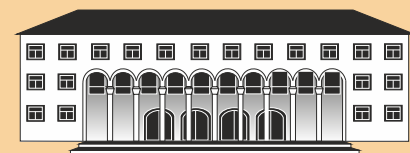
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