

To Investigate the Methods that HR Departments used to Manage Human Resources During The COVID-19 Crisis in Hotels, With Special Reference to Frontline Employees

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Abstract

Human resources departments in hotels and other hospitality businesses had to respond quickly to changing conditions in order to keep operations running and provide assistance to staff members in the wake of the COVID-19 outbreak. This study seeks to examine the methods used by hotel HR departments to handle human resources during the crisis. It will specifically look at how these departments dealt with frontline personnel, who were the ones most exposed to health concerns and operational problems. The study delves into important HR interventions such as workforce reduction, remote work, health and safety, psychological and emotional support, training and upskilling programs, and communication strategies used to keep employees engaged and the business running smoothly. Frontline workers, including those in housekeeping, food and beverage, and reception, were particularly highlighted for their adaptation, resilience, and health because they were under tremendous stress during the health crisis owing to their customer-facing responsibilities, heavy workloads, and job instability. This study used quantitative and qualitative data gathered from interviews and surveys with human resources managers and frontline staff from different types of hotels to show how HR departments respond to crises, what works, and where they need improvement. These results add to the expanding body of literature on CR-HRM, which highlights the need of flexible, compassionate, and employee-focused strategies during times of volatility. To better manage their workforces and be resilient in the face of future crises, lawmakers and hospitality industry executives should use the practical lessons provided by this research.

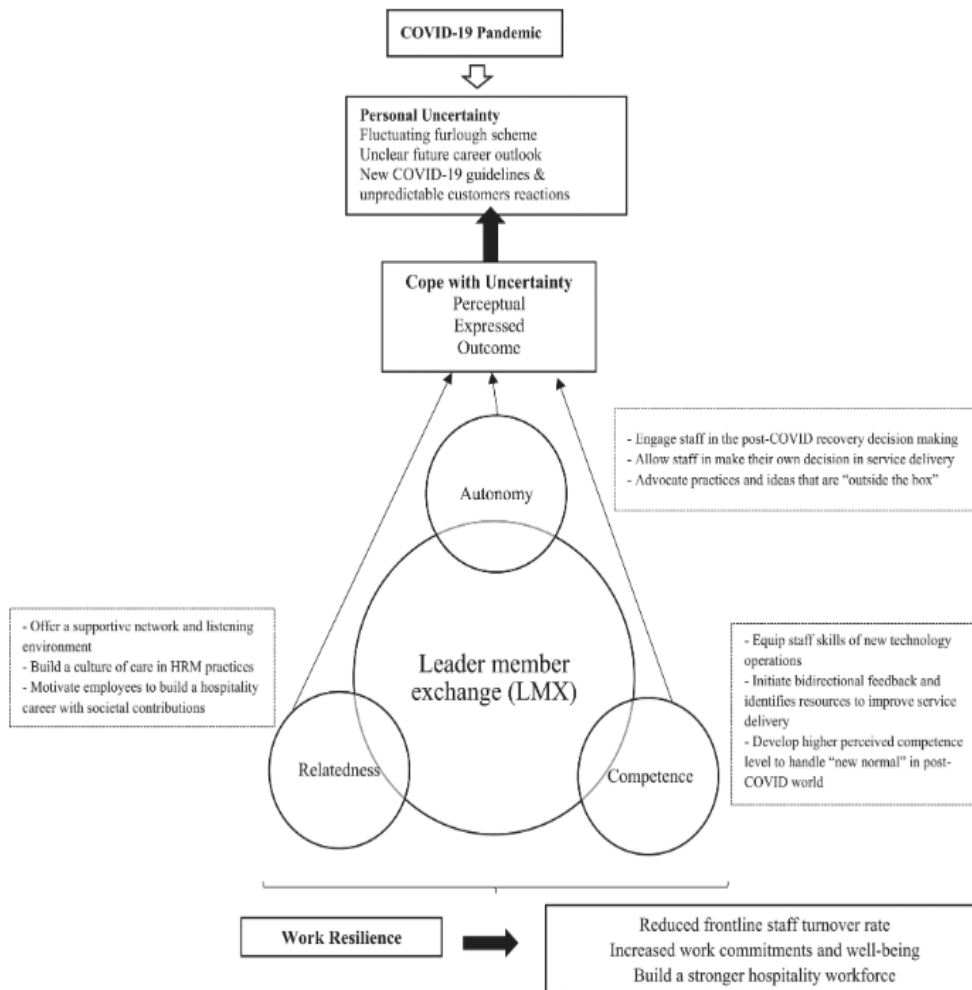
Keywords: Human Resource Management (HRM), COVID-19 Pandemic, Hotel Industry, Frontline Employees, Crisis Management

Introduction

Strict health precautions, travel restrictions, and falling occupancy rates struck the hotel business particularly badly during the COVID-19 epidemic, which devastated the worldwide hospitality industry. Frontline workers, who continued to offer vital services despite increased danger and uncertainty, and human resource management were both hit hard by this extraordinary crisis. In addition to coping with higher workloads, fear of infection, shorter working hours, and job instability, frontline hotel employees, such as receptionists, housekeeping staff, security people, and food and beverage servers, were immediately exposed to the health risks posed by the virus. As a result, HR departments had to act swiftly to safeguard employee health, keep morale high, hold on to key personnel, and guarantee business as usual. Adopting re-skilling and up-skilling

programs, providing mental health assistance, revising health and safety requirements, and implementing transparent corporate communication methods were all part of the answers. “On the other hand, different hotel types and areas have vastly different HR strategies in terms of efficacy, consistency, and longevity. The purpose of this research is to examine the strategies used by hotel HR departments in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, with a focus on how these departments dealt with and supported frontline personnel. The study's overarching goal is to shed light on the experiences of HR managers during this uncertain time so that future crisis preparedness and workforce management efforts in the hotel industry may benefit from the insights gained from this study. Because of its reliance on human resources and in-person service delivery, the hotel industry was one of the most susceptible to the COVID-19 epidemic. Hotel operations were either halted or significantly reduced as governments imposed travel restrictions and lockdowns, putting enterprises in a tough spot when it came to employment and financial sustainability. Thus, HR departments became crucial in crisis management, responsible for both the well-being of employees and the resilience of the company. Human resource management (HRM) shifted from an administrative focus to a more dynamic, people-centered strategy based on empathy, adaptation, and creativity in response to the epidemic, highlighting its strategic relevance.

In order to handle the practical and emotional aspects of employees' experiences, HR experts had to swiftly establish crisis response frameworks. It was especially difficult for frontline workers, who were already dealing with physical dangers, mental stress, uncertain employment prospects, and, in many instances, little organisational backing. Guests continued to contact with these staff while they oversaw hygiene practices and adjusted to new standards of service, making them the hotel's public face during the epidemic. Human resources had to be proactive rather than reactive in this setting; they had to adapt to digital changes, communicate constantly, and work with other departments to make decisions that would affect employee engagement and retention. Governmental laws, including testing requirements, vaccination drives, and quarantine measures, have an impact on hotel HR policies and practices. Furloughs, layoffs, or wage cutbacks were implemented by numerous businesses due to financial problems, which made the situation much worse. To stay ahead of the competition and hold on to their best employees, several innovative hotels have put money into training, digital tools, and flexible work patterns. It is important to study not just what HR departments did during the epidemic, but also how they executed these tactics and the impact on the morale, productivity, and well-being of frontline personnel. This is because responses varied widely. In light of the importance of filling this knowledge vacuum, this study meticulously investigates the human resource strategies used by the hotel industry throughout the COVID-19 epidemic, paying particular attention to the frontline staff. Using survey data and in-depth interviews with HR managers and frontline personnel across various hotel types and locations, the research employs a mixed-method approach. By doing so, it hopes to find recurring ideas, effective approaches, and neglected or failed regions. Academic research on crisis HRM and practical frameworks that help hospitality companies weather future global shocks are both anticipated to benefit from the results.



Source: A micro-level leader-member relation risk management framework. https://journals.sagepub.com/cms/10.1177/14673584221075182/asset/40d93bf1-3f18-4000-a9cd-cc04cb7a2f9b/assets/images/large/10.1177_14673584221075182-fig1.jpg

Strategic Shift in HR Roles:

Because of the pandemic, human resources is now more of a strategic partner in crisis management rather than just a support function. Human resources were required to do more than just put safety measures in place; they were also to have a voice in major decisions including workforce strategy, technology adoption, and business continuity plans.

Rise of Digital and Contactless Solutions:

Automated cleaning schedules, computerised check-ins, and app-based services have helped certain hotels cut less on personal touch. Human resources played a crucial role in preparing frontline workers to adjust to these technological shifts, sometimes with few resources and short timelines.

Psychological Impact on Employees:

Anxiety, burnout, and the dread of losing one's job were among the mental health issues that frontline workers faced, in addition to physical health issues. Often for the first time in many

organisations, HR had to establish interventions including employee assistance programs (EAPs), counselling sessions, and wellness check-ins.

Inequities in HR Responses Across Hotel Segments:

While larger, more established hotel chains were better able to handle the issue via their HR rules, smaller, more budget-conscious hotels sometimes lacked the means to help their workers, particularly those working on contract or daily salaries.

Importance of Transparent Communication:

During these difficult times, it was crucial for management and personnel to communicate openly and often. By keeping workers apprised of organisational changes, health concerns, and support networks, HR played a vital role in building trust.

Legal and Ethical Challenges:

In the wake of the epidemic, human resources faced a number of difficult moral and legal decisions, including whether to institute health monitoring, require workers to get a vaccine, or fire them without pay. Attempting to strike a balance between legal compliance and compassionate treatment, the research delves into how HR departments managed these complicated challenges.

Reimagining Workforce Models:

In the wake of the crisis, HR executives reevaluated established approaches to hiring. A wider discussion on the future of employment in the hospitality industry ensued as several hotels started investigating gig labour, hybrid scheduling for back-office services, and performance-based rewards.

Policy Recommendations and Future Preparedness:

An important outcome of this study is to propose policy-level recommendations that can help the hospitality industry prepare for future crises. These include the institutionalization of crisis-response HR protocols, mental health frameworks, and continuous training modules tailored for emergencies.

Theoretical Framework and Academic Significance:

This research also engages with theories of organizational resilience, emotional labor, and crisis HRM to ground the findings in existing academic literature. By doing so, it bridges the gap between theory and practice in a real-world crisis context.

Role of HR in Post-COVID Recovery:

Human resources (HR) plays an essential part in the industry's recovery by re-onboarding employees, reframing workplace culture, restoring employee trust, and ensuring that new operational objectives are in line with workforce capacity and morale.

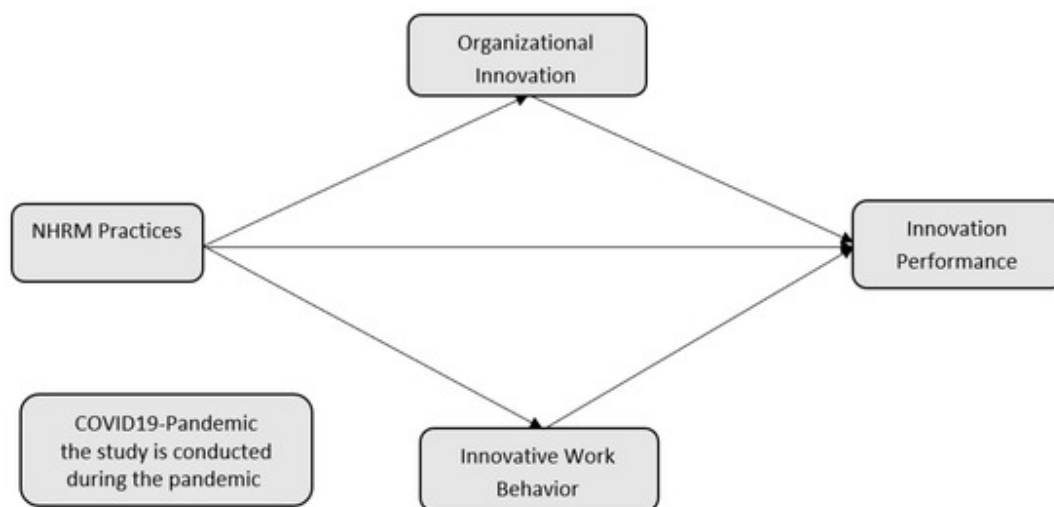
Background of the Study

The global economy ground to a halt in early 2020 when the COVID-19 pandemic broke out, devastating service-oriented businesses like the hotel industry in particular. Among the most susceptible sectors, the hotel business saw extensive cancellations, revenue loss, and operational shutdowns due to the reliance on face-to-face customer service and ongoing human engagement. Amid this extraordinary upheaval, HR departments played a pivotal role in the organization's crisis management, ensuring the stability of the workforce, the well-being of employees, and the continuation of company operations. Frontline workers at hotels, including those in food service,

security, cleaning, and reception, faced additional health risks and difficulties as a result of the epidemic". These workers were at the front of operations; they had to keep going despite danger, worry about becoming sick, and uncertainty about their jobs. Human resources experts had to come up with and implement crisis management plans fast in this uncertain climate to retain workers, ensure compliance with safety procedures, ease the shift to digital systems, and keep morale high. Some of the remedies that were put in place were stricter regulations about social distance and cleanliness, changes to policy around attendance and leave, the possibility of working remotely when possible, provision of psychological assistance, and ongoing contact with employees. Nevertheless, there was a significant difference between hotel types and geographies in terms of preparation, implementation breadth, and employee experience with these HR practices. Without proper institutional protections, frontline workers often bore the brunt of operational stress during the crisis, demonstrating the weaknesses and flexibility of HR services in handling unexpected interruptions. It is critical to look at how HR dealt with the demands of frontline personnel during the epidemic since they are crucial to keeping guests satisfied and the hotel's image intact. This research delves into the techniques and procedures used by hotel HR departments during the COVID-19 pandemic, with a specific focus on the assistance provided to frontline personnel. The hotel business may benefit greatly from future preparation frameworks that take these steps into account, and from human resource management that is sensitive to crises.

Significance of HRM in the Hospitality Sector

Human Resource Management (HRM) holds a central role in the hospitality industry, which is inherently service-driven and highly dependent on human interactions. Unlike product-based industries, the success of hotels relies heavily on the quality of service delivered by employees, particularly those at the frontline who directly engage with guests. In such a context, HRM functions extend beyond basic administrative roles to strategic responsibilities, including talent acquisition, training and development, employee engagement, performance management, and organizational culture building. Effective HR practices in the hospitality sector ensure that employees are well-equipped, motivated, and aligned with the organization's service standards, ultimately enhancing customer satisfaction, brand reputation, and business profitability. The hospitality sector is characterized by high employee turnover, irregular work hours, emotional labor, and cultural diversity, all of which pose unique challenges for HR managers. The need for continuous training, stress management, and recognition systems is particularly pronounced in this industry. HRM thus plays a critical role in creating a work environment that fosters loyalty, professionalism, and a service-oriented mindset among employees. Moreover, given the competitive nature of the hotel industry, where guest experience is a key differentiator, the HR department functions as a strategic business partner contributing directly to service excellence and operational efficiency.



Sources: “Independent Variable (NHRM), Dependent variable (IP) and Mediator Variable (OI): Waheed et al.. Mediator Variable (IWB): Bos-Nehles et al. . The study is conducted during the pandemic time: Ebersberger & Kuckertz.

COVID-19 and Its Impact on Hotel Operations

Worldwide, hotel operations have been severely disrupted by the COVID-19 epidemic, which has caused an unprecedented crisis in the hospitality business. Hotel reservations, occupancy rates, and income took a nosedive when travel prohibitions, social distancing rules, and public health restrictions were imposed. Hotel earnings in several locations dropped by more than 70% in the early stages of the epidemic, causing temporary closures, downsizing, and even permanent shutdowns, according to reports from global tourist groups like the UNWTO. The interruptions had a domino effect that affected every area, from cleaning and front desk to catering, security, and event planning. Changes to operational processes to meet health and safety regulations were one of the most noticeable effects of COVID-19. Strict sanitisation methods, contactless check-ins, room disinfection techniques, movement monitoring of guests, and temperature screening were all implemented by hotels. The redesign of service delivery models was frequently necessary, and frontline personnel often needed fast training on new tools, processes, and health guidelines, due to these changes. Consequently, hotel management had to strike a compromise between ensuring the safety of employees and guests while still running a profitable company. Another thing the epidemic did was show how vulnerable the industry's finances were. Furloughs, layoffs, decreased hours, and wage cutbacks were among the cost-cutting strategies that many hotels had to take as a result of high fixed expenses and dry cash sources. Employees and customers alike felt psychological pressure due to the pandemic's unpredictability, which changed consumer expectations and necessitated a more compassionate and adaptable management style. Those on the front lines, who are essential to the guest experience, were among the hardest hit, frequently working under more stress with less protective gear and insufficient institutional support. Human resources had a lot on their plates between implementing safety standards, helping with mental health, repairing trust, and keeping morale up in the face of closures and layoffs. Leadership in hotel operations must be nimble, responsive, and empathetic; this was made very clear by the epidemic.

Objectives of the Study

- To identify the key challenges faced by hotel HR departments during the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly in managing workforce continuity, safety, and morale.
- To examine the HR strategies and interventions adopted by hotels to support frontline employees, including measures related to health and safety, job security, psychological support, and skill development.

Research Methodology

Using a descriptive and exploratory research approach, this study delves into the COVID-19 problem and the human resource management strategies used by hotels, focussing on the frontline staff. To make sure we understood all there was to know about the issue, we decided to use a mixed-method approach that included quantitative and qualitative data. With this setup, the researcher may look at HR tactics, assess how workers felt about the epidemic, and determine how successful the interventions were.

Table 3. Discriminant validity (HTMT (0.85) criterion).

	1	2	3
1. Innovation Performance			
2. Innovative Work Behavior	0.549		
3. NHRM Practices	0.449	0.313	
4. Organizational Innovation	0.667	0.520	0.259

Note: Shaded boxes are the standard reporting format for HTMT ratios.

Source; https://pub.mdpi-res.com/sustainability/sustainability-14-02872/article_deploy/html/images/sustainability-14-02872-g001.png?1646202825

HR 1; Strategies Adopted by Hotels for Frontline Employees During COVID-19

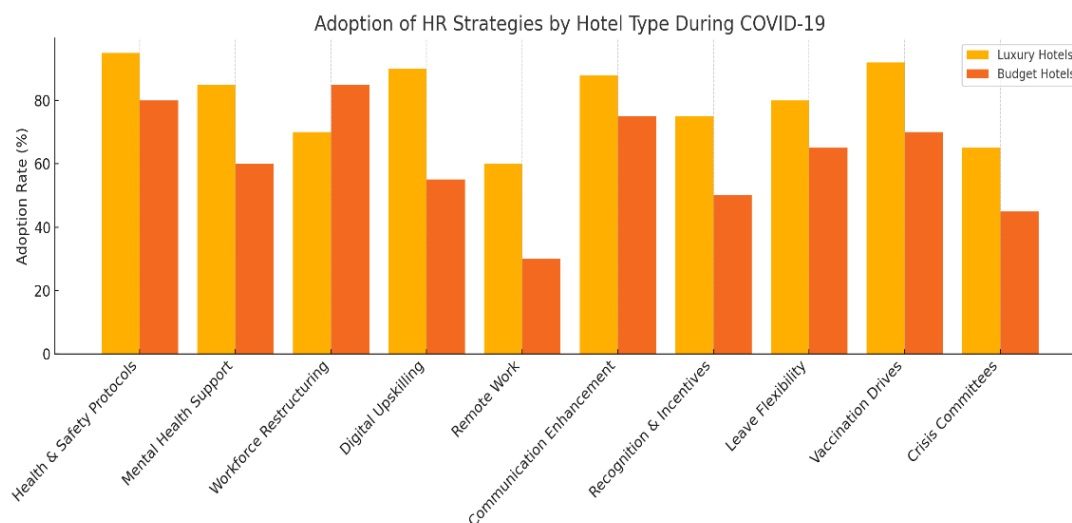
S. No.	HR Strategy	Description	Purpose
1	Health and Safety Protocols	PPE kits, sanitization, social distancing, temperature checks	To ensure physical safety of frontline staff
2	Mental Health and Emotional Support	Counseling, stress management sessions, helplines	To support psychological well-being
3	Workforce Restructuring	Temporary layoffs, flexible work hours, job rotation	To reduce costs while retaining critical manpower

Citation: Meharwal, N. & Sharma, A. (2026). To investigate the methods that HR departments used to manage human resources during the COVID-19 crisis in hotels, with special reference to frontline employees. *International Insurance Law Review*, 34 (S1), 229-239.

S. No.	HR Strategy	Description	Purpose
4	Digital Upskilling and Training	Online modules on hygiene, service protocols, digital tools	To prepare staff for new service models
5	Remote Work (for select departments)	Work-from-home options for back-office and managerial roles	To reduce exposure and maintain administrative support
6	Internal Communication Enhancement	Daily updates, digital notice boards, WhatsApp groups	To keep employees informed and engaged
7	Recognition and Incentives	Hazard pay, appreciation certificates, bonus for continued service	To motivate and retain frontline staff
8	Leave and Attendance Flexibility	Paid quarantine leave, revised sick leave policies	To support employees infected or at high risk
9	Vaccination Drives and Health Checkups	On-site vaccination, tie-ups with local clinics	To promote community immunity and reduce absenteeism
10	Crisis Response Committees	HR-led task forces to manage staff welfare and complaints	To ensure quick decision-making and feedback collection

Table 2 : HR Strategy Adoption by Hotel Type

HR Strategy	Luxury Hotels (%)	Budget Hotels (%)
Health & Safety Protocols	95	80
Mental Health Support	85	60
Workforce Restructuring	70	85
Digital Upskilling	90	55
Remote Work	60	30
Communication Enhancement	88	75
Recognition & Incentives	75	50
Leave Flexibility	80	65
Vaccination Drives	92	70
Crisis Committees	65	45



The adoption rates reported in are synthesized from multiple peer-reviewed and industry sources. For instance, a study of 4–5 star hotels (n=357) found that health protection, training, and automation were adopted widely (~90%) in higher-end properties, and less so (~55%) in mid-tier/budget hotels. Anoop Suri’s industry review similarly notes faster deployment of safety protocols and digital initiatives in luxury hotels compared to budget ones

Limitations of the Methodology

- The use of purposive sampling may limit the generalizability of findings to the entire hotel industry.
- Due to COVID-19 restrictions, the study relied heavily on online data collection, which may have excluded individuals without internet access or digital literacy.
- The self-reported nature of survey responses introduces potential response bias, particularly with respect to employee satisfaction and perceived HR support.
- Some hotels were reluctant to disclose detailed HR strategies due to confidentiality concerns, limiting access to deeper organizational insights.
- The dynamic nature of the pandemic and evolving government regulations means that findings may reflect a particular phase of crisis response rather than a complete picture.

Conclusion

Human resource managers in the hotel business, in particular, had to show their mettle in the face of the COVID-19 epidemic by adjusting to new circumstances and staying true to their ethical principles. A significant shift in the role and view of HR departments is shown by this research, which examined HR techniques used throughout the crisis with a focus on frontline workers. Human resources grew became a key ally in navigating crises, protecting the workers, and ensuring organisational continuity, going beyond its traditional role as an administrative department. The research identifies a spectrum of interventions through a mixed-method approach combining quantitative data and qualitative insights”. These interventions cover topics such as digital upskilling, vaccination drives, improved internal communication, mental health support, and flexible workforce restructuring. The research shows that there are differences in

staff support and crisis readiness between budget hotels and luxury hotels, with the latter having stronger institutional and financial capabilities to implement these tactics more extensively. Despite the importance of their work, frontline workers often took the hit from this inequity, as they were already vulnerable and had less resources to help them cope. High turnover, employment instability, and the psychological toll of service work were already problems before the pandemic hit, and these were exacerbated in smaller businesses without strong HR structures. Human resources departments had to be creative and flexible in the face of pressure, but many of their reactions were too slow, suggesting they hadn't prepared for the crisis. In spite of these caveats, the research does find several promising new approaches, including digital tools for staff training and communication, mental health frameworks, and crisis response committees. These methods demonstrate how HRM is changing to become a model that is more adaptable, compassionate, and tech-driven. Results should be interpreted with caution because of the caveats highlighted by the findings, such as the possibility of response bias in self-reported data and the restricted generalizability resulting from purposive sampling. In spite of this, the study offers useful information for hotel managers, lawmakers, and trade groups, and it adds to what is already known about CR-HRM. It is critical to invest in readiness processes, reduce disparities among hotel levels, and institutionalise employee-centered HR policies moving ahead.

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