

Recovery of human resources in the hospitality industry post COVID-19 in Vietnam: Current situation and solutions

Phục hồi nguồn nhân lực ngành khách sạn, nhà hàng sau đại dịch COVID-19 ở Việt Nam:
Thực trạng và giải pháp

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Abstract

The strong outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic during the period of 2019-2021 had a severe impact on the hospitality industry in Viet Nam. The implementation of social distancing measures led to the suspension of operations for numerous hotels and restaurants. Some other businesses had to reduce their workforce due to financial constraints. The pandemic not only posed significant challenges to hospitality business operations but also created difficulties for the hospitality's human resources. Employees lost their jobs, went on furlough, or switched to other professions, all of which had negative effects on the morale of hotel and restaurant staff. As of now, the hospitality industry is in the process of recovering from the pandemic. However, the challenges that businesses face persist. One of the most significant current challenges for hotels and restaurants is a severe shortage of personnel. Through qualitative research methods, this study aims to analyze the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on workforce dynamics and psychological changes among hospitality industry workers. The research also provides some solutions to recover and enhance the quality of the human resources in the hotel and restaurant sector post COVID-19.

Keywords: COVID-19; human resources; psychological changes.

Tóm tắt

Sự bùng phát mạnh mẽ của đại dịch COVID-19 từ năm 2019 đến năm 2021 đã tác động nặng nề đến ngành khách sạn tại Việt Nam. Việc thực hiện các biện pháp giãn cách xã hội đã khiến nhiều khách sạn, nhà hàng phải tạm dừng hoạt động. Một số doanh nghiệp khác buộc phải cắt giảm nhân sự do những hạn chế về tài chính. Đại dịch không chỉ đặt ra những thách thức không nhỏ cho hoạt động kinh doanh khách sạn mà còn gây ra những khó khăn cho nguồn nhân lực của ngành khách sạn. Nhân viên bị mất việc, bị buộc nghỉ phép hoặc chuyển sang các ngành nghề khác, tất cả những điều này đã ảnh hưởng tiêu cực đến sức khỏe tinh thần và động lực làm việc của đội ngũ nhân viên khách sạn, nhà hàng. Tính đến thời điểm hiện tại, ngành khách sạn đang trong quá trình phục hồi sau đại dịch. Tuy nhiên, những thách thức mà doanh nghiệp phải đối mặt vẫn tồn tại. Một trong những thách thức lớn nhất hiện nay đối với các khách sạn và nhà hàng là tình trạng thiếu hụt nhân sự trầm trọng. Bằng phương pháp định tính, nghiên cứu này nhằm mục đích phân tích sự tác động của đại dịch COVID-19 đối với động lực làm việc của đội ngũ lao động và những thay đổi tâm lý của nhân viên trong

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ngành khách sạn. Nghiên cứu cũng đưa ra một số giải pháp phục hồi và nâng cao chất lượng nguồn nhân lực tại các khách sạn - nhà hàng sau đại dịch COVID-19.

Từ khóa: COVID-19; nguồn nhân lực; thay đổi tâm lý.

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused uncountable difficulties to the world economy, and tourism is considered as the industry facing the most challenges after the pandemic. The implementation of lock-down planning and social distance policies has led to a severe decline in tourist arrivals in the tourism and hospitality industry on a global scale [14]. The fact that the pandemic resulted in financial difficulties has caused many hotels, resorts, restaurants to close, and some hospitality businesses declared bankrupt. As a corollary, individual career experiences, job-opportunities in the future have been directly impacted both in the short term and long term [3].

Globally, initial estimates from the International Labor Organization (ILO) (2020) indicate that roughly 7% of working hours will disappear in the second half of 2020, indicating that up to 200 million people unemployed, particularly individuals and small business owners working in services, tourism, travel, and retail. Unlike workers in other fields who can work remotely, hospitality industry requires employees directly contact with tourists, so they are strongly affected by the pandemic [30]. Besides, the pandemic led to changes in the behavior and the psychology of workers [9]. Recent studies have mentioned negative impacts on the psychology of hospitality employees; such as career shock, stress, depression [32], job insecurity [29], intention to quit job [10]. In other words, human resources in hotels and restaurants have experienced unprecedented career shocks, leading to changes in future career orientation.

After more than 2 years of being affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, Viet Nam tourism

industry is making efforts to recover. However, hospitality businesses continue to face new problems related to human resources post COVID-19. Firstly, hospitality businesses have a shortage of human resources, especially skilled employees. Secondly, hospitality industry has witnessed changes in the psychology of workers. The pandemic has increased the work pressures on workers, making them more clearly aware of the insecurity of their current jobs. Prolonged stress can reduce employee job satisfaction, reduce their long-term commitment with businesses, and strongly increase intentions to quit or leave for another field. Therefore, solutions to recover human resources and enhance the quality of current employees for hospitality industry in Viet Nam post COVID-19 are essential. By using qualitative methods, this study aims to (1) show how the perception of occupational risk affects human resources in Vietnam hospitality industry after the pandemic, (2) analyze changes in behavior and psychology of hospitality workers after the pandemic and (3) propose solutions to recover the tourism workforce post COVID-19. These contents will be clarified in each specific content section of the study.

2. Literature review

2.1. Human resource management in hospitality sector

In a travel itinerary, numerous activities are listed, starting with finding information about the destination and ending with sharing memories after the experience. These activities occur along the tourism value chain in exit, stopover, or entry areas, collectively shaping the travel experience. People are a crucial element in this value chain, explaining why they play a significant role in service quality, customer

satisfaction and loyalty within tourism and hospitality organizations. In other words, people are the factor that directly affects the service quality [31]. The accommodation industry particularly relies on extensive interaction between employees and customers, forming the basis of customer experience rooted in service quality. Any mishandling of customer services by employees can have significant negative impacts on the overall customer experience and tarnish a hotel's long-lasting reputation. Many studies have demonstrated the direct affection of customer satisfaction to service quality and productivity of accommodation businesses. Excellent service depends on the capacity, behavior and attitude of employees, so hotels have to make the first priority to human resource management strategies and employee care policies [8].

Businesses must acknowledge the importance of human resources. Implementing strategies to enhance the quality of HR can help them gain a competitive advantage and improve business efficiency. HRM in hospitality refers to activities such as 1) performance appraisal, remuneration; 2) recruitment/selection, training and development, compensation and benefits; 3) communication, empowerment; 4) employee recognition, respect and reward [20]. Establishing a company culture that fosters a professional, friendly working environment and prioritizes employee mental health is essential.

Managing human resources in the hospitality industry is challenging due to seasonal effects, working environment or compensation policies, which contribute to high staff turnover [26]. Job stress and burnout are among the factors affecting employee well-being and leading to turnover. Moreover, changes in tourism demand directly impact human resource management. Natural disasters, pandemics, terrorism or economic crises can decrease tourist numbers, prompting hospitality businesses to lay off

employees or leading many employees to seek other jobs. Employees play a significant role in the hospitality industry, emphasizing the need to enhance and develop appropriate policies to mitigate employee dissatisfaction and turnover intentions [5].

2.2. The effects of COVID-19 on HRM in hospitality industry

The COVID-19 has left severe consequences for many aspects of life, economy, society, income and employment. Among them, it can be affirmed that the tourism industry is most affected on a global scale. The majority of workers in the tourism industry have lost their jobs, have unstable income, a difficult life for a long time, and go through a series of changes in emotions and behavior.

2.2.1. COVID-19 as a career shock

A career shock can be defined as “a disruptive and extraordinary event that is, at least to some degree, caused by factors outside the focal individual's control and that triggers a deliberate thought process concerning one's career” [4]. It comprises two key elements: (1) an event and (2) a process of initial sense-making, implying that a disruptive event is not inherently a career shock. Career shock directly impacts work motivation and serves as a precursor to future career decisions.

COVID-19 can be a career shock as it prompts employees to reassess their careers or seek alternative employment opportunities. The effects of COVID-19 on individual careers manifest in three consequences. First, career shock directly affects employee's awareness of their working environment, leading to heightened perception of health risks. Risk perception can lead to depressive symptoms, stress and threaten the mental health of hospitality workers [12]. Second, the impact of career shocks varies with time. It can have different effects in the short and long term and at

different career stages. Career shock mostly causes short-term negative psychological and career consequences (e.g., job loss, salary reduction, decreased satisfaction); over time, some individuals may move away and thus create future job insecurity. Finally, negative career shocks can induce changes in employees' behavior, mindset, and long-term commitment.

2.2.2. Non-employability and mental health

Lockdown measures during the COVID-19 pandemic led to a significant decrease in room occupancy and hotel revenue [7], forcing many hotels to temporarily close, while restaurants either suspended operations or shifted to takeout service only [17]. To survive, hospitality businesses implemented cost-cutting measures such as layoffs and reduced working hours [1], exacerbating mental health issues among workers due to prolonged unemployment and job insecurity. The research of [22] prove that being unemployed is linked to mental health problems such as depression, anxiety and even self-harm. Other researches [13] claimed that downsizing labor organization could threaten mental health of employees and decreases labor efficiency. [23] also recognized that organizational restructuring policies could increase employees' job insecurity, occupational stressors and job commitment. The perception of job insecurity induced by COVID-19 may lead employees to believe it would be challenging, if not impossible, to find another job with their current skills, thereby negatively impacting their psychological health. Job insecurity also gives rise to negative emotions, lack of commitment, and low job satisfaction. When experiencing negative events (e.g., COVID-19), individuals' emotions are easily swayed, influencing their attitudes and behaviors [19]. These negative emotions also affect how individuals perceive their future career paths, leading to anticipations of negative outcomes and undermining confidence in task

fulfillment and employee performance [2]. Unlike other disasters or crises, the uncertainty surrounding the potential resurgence of the pandemic exerts significant psychological pressure on hospitality workers [10]. Moreover, post COVID-19, the economic recession may precipitate a substantial reduction in staffing in the tourism industry, causing apprehension among new workers regarding the vulnerability and uncertainty of career prospects [11].

3. Current situation

3.1. Changes in HRM post COVID-19

Mental health: Changes in the mental health of hospitality workers post-COVID-19 until now have been striking. A significant percentage of hospitality employees report experiencing heightened levels of stress, anxiety, and depression [24]. For instance, a survey conducted by Popa et al. found that 65% of hospitality workers reported increased stress levels since the onset of the pandemic, while 50% reported symptoms of anxiety. Additionally, data from Yu et al. revealed that 40% of hospitality workers reported feeling depressed post-COVID-19. These mental health challenges are often attributed to various factors, including job insecurity, financial instability, and concerns about health and safety. Despite significant recovery in the tourism industry post-pandemic, the reality is that many hotel employees continue to grapple with uncertainties about the future of the industry and the potential for future outbreaks.

Employee's attitude: The post-COVID-19 period has witnessed notable shifts in the attitudes of hospitality workers. A notable percentage of hospitality employees reported feeling insecure about their job stability and expressed a willingness to leave their current organization [6]. Specifically, the study found that 60% of respondents experienced heightened levels of depression and anxiety, contributing to

a 45% increase in turnover intentions post-pandemic. Moreover, mental exhaustion was identified as a key factor, leading to a 35% decline in work motivation and satisfaction, consequently resulting in a 25% increase in absenteeism and turnover rates. Research by [25] revealed that 70% of businesses in the sector implemented changes in salary, bonus, and employee welfare policies in response to the crisis. These alterations further influenced employee attitudes, with 55% reporting reduced job satisfaction and motivation [21]. Additionally, the pandemic-induced staff shortages have been quantified, with accommodation establishments experiencing a 30% decrease in workforce retention rates. This has led to a turnover rate of 40% among former employees seeking alternative employment opportunities, while new hires have faced uncertainty about their career prospects, resulting in a turnover rate of 35% after a brief stint.

3.2. Human resources situation in Vietnam's tourism sector post COVID-19

According to statistics from Vietnam's Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism, in 2019, tourism contributed over 9.2% to the national GDP and provided 750,000 direct jobs. Among them, 45% were trained in tourism, 35% were trained in other specialized fields, and 20% were untrained. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has posed significant challenges to the tourism sector's human resources. In 2020, tourism businesses reduced their workforce by 70-80% [16]. In 2021, the number of full-time workers accounted for only 25% compared to 2020. Approximately 30% of employees left their jobs or terminated their labor contracts, while about 35% took temporary leave, and 10% worked intermittently [18]. Many people became unemployed, changed professions, took temporary leave, or shifted to other industries.

According to a report from the Vietnam National Administration of Tourism, during the recovery phase, the labor supply in Vietnam's tourism sector still faces many problems as it has not met the demand of enterprises, especially for highly skilled workers. The shortage of labor in the tourism industry is concerning, with 72%-82% of the workforce losing their jobs or switching professions due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Recruiting labor has been challenging because the pandemic not only affected the workforce in businesses at that time but also significantly impacted the recruitment efforts of tourism training institutions. Tourism-related training institutions find it difficult to enroll students, and graduates from the years 2020-2021 struggle to find jobs and often switch to unrelated fields, exacerbating the labor shortage in the tourism sector after the COVID-19 recovery [27]. Many tourism, hotel, and travel companies have indicated that although they retained many core employees during the pandemic, this workforce is insufficient to meet the increasing demand for tourism. According to business statistics, the current workforce only meets 50-60% of the market demand.

Evaluating the post-pandemic labor demand, the Vietnam Tourism Association stated that currently, the tourism industry needs approximately 485,000 employees in accommodations with over 70% capacity, including about 45,000 administrative staff. Projecting future growth, Vietnam is expected to need 950,000-1,050,000 hotel rooms by 2025, 1,300,000-1,450,000 rooms by 2030. Therefore, by 2025, the demand for labor in accommodation establishments will be over 800,000, and by 2030, it will exceed 1 million. On average, more than 60,000 workers will need to be added annually by 2030, underscoring the urgent need to replenish the workforce for the recovery of Vietnam's tourism industry [28].

3.3. Impact of the pandemic on tourism students - future human resources

According to a report from the Department of Training (Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism), there are approximately 35 training schools in tourism, hotel, and restaurant fields, comprising 20 colleges and 15 intermediate schools. In 2021, these schools enrolled 30,711 tourism students, with 9,501 at the college level and 21,210 at the intermediate level, representing a 50% decrease compared to 2019. The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted the human resources of the tourism industry, leading to feelings of confusion and anxiety among current and future tourism students. This has resulted in decreased confidence, motivation, and passion for pursuing careers in tourism and hotel management. These motivational states influence students' perceptions of the hospitality profession and their intentions to pursue careers in the field after graduation.

4. Discussion

4.1. Harnessing the role and support of the government and state

To support the post-COVID-19 recovery of human resources in the tourism industry, the Vietnamese government can implement the following solutions:

- Financially support training programs: This may involve funding universities, training organizations and providing scholarships for students or workers interested in the tourism industry. Many countries offer funding sources such as scholarships and investment capital for tourism education and training. For instance, the Australian Government provides financial support for international students and tourism industry workers through programs like the Endeavor Scholarships and Fellowships.

- Develop specialized training programs: Governments can encourage the development of

specialized training programs in specific areas of the tourism industry, such as tour guiding, customer service management, tourism marketing, or cultural heritage preservation. These programs should equip learners with the skills needed to succeed in the industry and meet market requirements. Countries such as Sweden have developed specialized training programs in areas like sustainable tourism management. For example, Lund University in Sweden offers a Master in Tourism Development and Culture Management program aimed at deepening students' understanding of tourism management and cultural heritage conservation.

- Encourage continuous learning: Governments can introduce policies that promote continuous learning and skills development in tourism, including financial support or scholarships for employees. Many countries have implemented policies to encourage ongoing learning in tourism. For example, the Singapore government has established financial grants and tourism-related training programs such as SkillsFuture to ensure tourism employees stay updated with new skills and developments.

- Promote research and development: Investing in research and development in the tourism sector can enhance the knowledge and skills of the workforce. For example, the government of Canada has established the Tourism Research Center to foster research in the tourism industry and develop new solutions to enhance industry quality and competitiveness.

4.2. The response and actions of Vietnam's hospitality enterprises

4.2.1. Increasing insurance packages for employees

This action aims to enhance employee rights protection by strengthening insurance packages, including health and accident coverage, to ensure safe working conditions and attract

talents. Leading tourism companies like Air Canada and Qantas Airways in countries such as Canada and Australia have expanded insurance benefits, particularly in the post-pandemic era, fostering a safer environment and attracting skilled workers. Consequently, employee retention rates have risen, absenteeism due to health reasons has declined significantly, and overall morale has improved, fostering a positive and productive workplace environment.

To enhance employee insurance packages and support the recovery of human resources in Vietnam's hospitality industry, businesses should implement a comprehensive strategy. This involves understanding employee needs through surveys, exploring various insurance options, and selecting suitable packages. Improving existing insurance coverage and seeking discounts from insurers can help alleviate financial burdens. Effective communication and employee education ensure clear understanding of benefits, achieved through workshops or educational materials. Integrating insurance into human resources management strategies enhances recruitment and retention efforts, fostering a positive work environment and attracting quality personnel to the industry.

4.2.2. Providing information, knowledge, and essential skills for human resources regarding personal health protection

Firstly, organizing regular training sessions on safety and hygiene, providing specific guidance on personal protective equipment and effective safety measures. Simultaneously, creating detailed instructional materials with illustrations aids employees in implementation. Additionally, developing a rapid response plan for potential situations. Providing psychological support and fostering an optimistic mindset, including offering stress management and positive thinking training, are also essential

steps. Communication campaigns and the establishment of a safe community further foster a sense of security. Utilizing various media channels to disseminate safety and health information and encouraging active participation contributes to a collective sense of security. Finally, continuous monitoring and evaluation of measures allow businesses to update policies as needed for maximum safety. This approach not only safeguards the health of employees and guests but also contributes to the recovery and development of the hospitality workforce. These are international examples of regular safety and hygiene training sessions, alongside effective communication and emotional support measures:

- Marriott International - Training on Safety and Hygiene: Marriott International has organized regular safety and hygiene training sessions for their employees globally. These training sessions provide specific guidance on the use of personal protective equipment, implementing effective safety measures, and adhering to cleaning procedures. This helps employees feel more confident in dealing with dangerous situations and reduces the risk of infection.

- InterContinental Hotels Group (IHG) - Rapid Response Plan: IHG has developed a rapid response plan for all possible situations, including those related to health and safety. This plan includes specific measures and action plans to deal with emergency situations, helping tourism businesses respond flexibly and effectively in all situations.

- Hilton Worldwide - Psychological Support and Stress Management Training: Hilton Worldwide has organized training sessions on emotional support and stress management for their employees. These training sessions help employees learn how to manage stress and maintain optimism in difficult work

environments. This helps improve employee morale and overall mental health.

Utilizing Media Channels - Communication Campaigns: Many leading tourism businesses have used various communication channels such as television, radio, social media and email to organize information campaigns on safety and hygiene. Creating these information campaigns helps create a safe community where people can share information and experiences, creating a spirit of solidarity and peace of mind within the work community.

Monitoring and Evaluation - Continuous Improvement: Leading tourism businesses regularly monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of safety and hygiene measures. This helps them update policies and procedures based on emerging situations and make necessary adjustments to ensure maximum safety for employees and customers.

4.3. Tourism training institutions

4.3.1. Changes in training program

Hospitality training programs in the US and UK have evolved in response to COVID-19 challenges, focusing on preparing students for the industry's post-pandemic landscape. This includes education on changes in customer preferences, health protocols, and operational strategies. Programs now emphasize comprehensive training on health and safety protocols to navigate new industry standards. The pandemic has accelerated digital adoption; thus, training emphasizes digital skills like online booking systems, contactless payments, virtual event planning, and digital marketing. Students are trained to use technology to enhance guest experiences and streamline operations. Given industry uncertainty, resilience and crisis management skills are prioritized, teaching students to identify risks, develop contingency plans, and adapt quickly to unexpected disruptions such as pandemics,

natural disasters, or economic downturns. Thereby, institutions in Vietnam need to update training programs to provide students with relevant knowledge quickly. In addition, training students for hands-on skills to ensure the health safety of tourists and themselves in the workplace also needs to be implemented.

4.3.2. Linking and collaborating with businesses

Hospitality universities must forge partnerships with industry stakeholders to offer students valuable internship and experiential learning opportunities. These partnerships may include virtual internships, remote projects, or collaborations with local businesses to ensure students gain practical experience in a safe environment. Higher education and vocational training institutions in the tourism sector can also connect with professional associations and businesses to anticipate labor demand, establish output standards, and equip students with industry-relevant skills. Webinars and online forums connecting schools, businesses, and students can facilitate expression, knowledge sharing, and problem-solving, fostering collaboration to advance the tourism industry. Here are some of the key associations that contribute to job creation in Vietnam's tourism industry:

- Vietnam Tourism Association (VITA): As the leading tourism association in Vietnam, VITA represents and advocates for the interests of the tourism industry.

- Vietnam National Administration of Tourism (VNAT): VNAT is the government agency responsible for overseeing the development and promotion of tourism in Vietnam.

- Vietnam Tourism Advisory Board (TAB): TAB is a public-private partnership platform that brings together government representatives, industry leaders, and experts to provide strategic

advice and recommendations for the development of Vietnam's tourism industry.

- Vietnam Hotel Association (VHA): VHA represents the interests of the hotel and accommodation sector in Vietnam. It advocates for hospitality standards, provides training for hotel staff, and supports initiatives for job creation and workforce development in the industry.

4.3.3. Digital technology integration

Tourism training institutions need to update their curriculum to incorporate knowledge and skills relevant to the digital revolution in the industry. This involves enhancing proficiency in information technology among tourism professionals and deepening understanding of core digital technologies and their applications. Adapting the labor force training system to meet the demand for technologically skilled personnel is imperative. This entails introducing courses on emerging applications and technologies in the tourism industry. Here are some digital technologies that could be integrated into teaching program:

- Online learning platforms: Utilizing learning management systems (LMS) allows educators to deliver course materials digitally, providing students with flexible access to resources.

- Virtual Reality (VR) and Augmented Reality (AR): VR and AR technologies offer immersive experiences that simulate real-world hospitality environments. Students can engage in virtual hotel tours, restaurant simulations, event planning scenarios, and customer service simulations, providing hands-on learning experiences without leaving the classroom.

- Data analytics and business intelligence tools: Teaching students to use industry-specific analytics tools equips them with skills to analyze

market trends and optimize business strategies based on data insights.

- Hospitality management software: Introducing students to industry-standard software systems like property management systems (PMS) and point-of-sale (POS) systems familiarizes them with essential tools and workflows in hospitality management.

5. Conclusion

5.1. Limitations and future research

This study used a qualitative methodology, enabling exploration of new phenomena and in-depth investigation of the topic. Validity of the findings can be increased by using quantitative methods or mixed methods. For further studies, the following are suggested: empirical studies on HR challenges post-COVID-19 in Vietnam, innovative strategies for post-pandemic human resource management, experiences of clinical organizations, qualitative studies on health professionals' management during crises, and evaluation of strengths and weaknesses in managing COVID-19 in developing countries.

5.2. Implications

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted Vietnam's hospitality industry, leading to immense challenges and shortage in HR. To address this, comprehensive solutions are needed to meet post-pandemic demands, including effective retention, attraction, and development of the hospitality workforce. Specific mechanisms and policies are necessary to tackle post-pandemic HR issues, requiring active involvement from various levels, sectors, and stakeholders. This study highlights HRM strategies for organization to enhance employee satisfaction, productivity, motivation, adaptation to change, welfare, and health. By creating better working conditions, talent management, and flexibility, it is hoped that Vietnam's hospitality

HR will develop sustainably, contributing to the overall growth of the tourism industry.

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