

Research Paper

COVID-19 Pandemic and Beyond: Investigating Extant Human Resource Management Issues in India's Hotel Industry

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Abstract: The onslaught of COVID-19 pandemic has remained punitive for the global industries. Attempts to comprehend, adapt and act have become increasingly gruelling in light of this undesirably prolonged epidemiological event. Earnings in numerous sectors have been reduced to the bones and the mechanisms and procedures of handling human resources have been challenged beyond expectations. The current research builds on the extant studies on COVID-19 crisis and a qualitative inquiry was conducted from the perspective of human resource management (HRM) issues. Responses from 17 personnel in key HR positions from high-end hotel properties in India were collected and examined. The identified issues facing HRM include role ambiguity, employee anxiety, demoralised employee spirit, organisations' inability and inadequacy to provide support, lack of control, job insecurity, downsizing and several more. The study further outlines latent solutions synthesised from the open-ended survey responses. These include the need for resilience, health and safety protocols, vaccinations, multiskilling, positive work environment, and flexible working hours, to cite a few. The paper discusses the responses in the backdrop of evolving related scholarship to enrich the considered research perspective. Further, the study reflects upon the potential implications for theory and practice as well as outlines future scope of investigation.

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Introduction

With more than two years of continued existence, the COVID-19 pandemic has affected every fathomable social phenomenon. The severity, since its first appearance, has compounded rapidly across international borders (Kaushal & Srivastava, 2021). India witnessed a second surge of pandemic cases in April–May 2021, which was more severe than the first, both in terms of number of new cases and fatalities. The pandemic brought a grim realisation to organisations and businesses of their ill preparedness and scarce knowledge of handling crises (Beninger & Francis, 2021). Organisations were forced to make difficult decisions in relation to managing their existing manpower (Adikaram et al., 2021). Leadership is frequently confronted with the challenges of crises, and the decision makers are expected to anticipate the wide-ranging repercussions that may ensue such unexpected events (Roberts, 2020). During COVID-19, intense measures such as curfews and lockdowns rendered various industries to struggle for survival. Organisations faced unprecedented financial and operational challenges and have been using drastic measures to remain afloat amidst the pandemic, which now is chiefly being observed as perpetual.

To survive, businesses downsized or shut down operations (Blit, 2020). Hospitality businesses are the prominent casualties in the ongoing turmoil (Soni, et al. 2023; Srivastava, et al., 2023; Suneeth et al., 2021). In retrospect, the Indian hospitality industry hoped for a revival by the end of 2020 and onwards. However, contrary to expectations, the sector saw an even grimmer 2021 with another wave of the pandemic hitting India, a country that came behind the USA in registering total global COVID-19 caseload. The sector was already severely hit in the first year of the pandemic in 2020 (Breier et al., 2021; Kaushal & Srivastava, 2021; Sönmez et al., 2020; Huang et al., 2021). The continued surge in cases in the subsequent year further dwarfed the woes of the former. Estimated job loss in Indian hospitality sector mounted to 2.5 million (Saraswathy, 2021).

Research into the psychological enquiries have traversed across geographies over the past two years (Alkhamees et al., 2020; Grover et al., 2020; Tee et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2020) acknowledging a consistent decline in operational and service productivity (Schmitt et al., 2021). The scholarship has garnered momentum in acknowledging the graveness of the pandemic-ridden situation, especially the

ensuing developments. One such attempt is made through this qualitative enquiry. While studies with wider and more diverse disciplinary orientations are underway, it is imperative to remain abreast and document the evolving issues and challenges brought about by the COVID pandemic. In particular, human resources in the hospitality sector is undergoing an unprecedented challenging time. The severity and omnipresence of turmoil has made this event more potent and worthy of continuous investigation. As a result, the study attempts to present a snapshot of the ongoing developments amidst the pandemic, specific to the hospitality industry in India.

As the portentous event continues to unveil, a study such as this should be viewed as fragmentary, yet crucial in capturing the current impact of the pandemic on the Indian hospitality sector. The hospitality industry employs millions of people in the global economy, which makes it all the more critical to understand the impact of the pandemic on human resource management (HRM) in hospitality. In this respect, the present study can help organisations understand how to support employee well-being and mental health during such challenging times and ensure business continuity by identifying strategies to retain key talent, maintain employee engagement, and ensure business sustainability (Hervie et al. 2022; Khan et al., 2021; Shapoval et al., 2021). For this purpose, the focus of the current investigation is on HRM issues in Indian hotels.

Literature Review

The role of employees in the service industry in general and the hospitality industry, in particular, is critical to organisational performance. Theories and models like the resource based theory (Barney, 1991), the dynamic capability theory (Teece et al., 1997), competency-based theory (Hamel & Prahalad, 1990), conservation of resource theory (Hobfoll, 2001), and the organisational-social capital theory (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998) argue that human resources or human capital in terms of knowledge, skills, attitude, personality and behaviour, can be a significant marker of organisational success and competitive advantage (Kusluvan et al., 2010). Hotel jobs are inherently stressful owing to several job-related factors. Zhao and Ghiselli (2016) in their study identified aspects of hospitality such as long working hours, irregular work schedule, frequent job turnover, working on holidays, split-shift (working two to three shifts and night rotations) and low pay scales as the key reasons for job withdrawal amongst hotel employees.

Further, the use of hard HR approach by firms during crises to cut down cost creates a formidable situation for employees. Drawing from previous studies on crisis management in hospitality, a direct impact on job related characteristics is evident. Israeli et al. (2011) in their study on crisis management practices of luxury hotels in India inferred cost reduction through freezing of pay rates, replacement of highly

paid employees with lowly paid employees, laying off employees, and using unpaid vacations, as the most common HR practices. A report presented to the Labour Relations Commission also revealed a pattern of general labour reduction, reduction in training and development budget, stricter work regime, as well as abatement of bonuses, pensions, and fringe benefits, in firms during crises (Roche et al., 2011). In this regard, the recent COVID-19 pandemic has directly impacted HRM in hotels at an unprecedented scale.

Hospitality employees were among the first to experience the shock of COVID-19 in the form of organisational scale-down resulting in an escalation of employee lay-offs and salary cuts. Due to the financial impact of COVID-19, many organisations had to reduce staff or furlough employees (Baranik et al., 2019). Nahar and Thakur (2022) found that organisations struggled to balance between combating financial constraints and maintaining employee morale and motivation during these difficult times. Another study on COVID-19 and its impact on job engagement and turnover intent, indicated that job insecurity caused by the pandemic is the major stressor for hospitality employees (Jung et al., 2021). Job insecurity is experienced by employees when they perceive threats to different job features like lack of promotion opportunities, autonomy, or occurrence of events that would negatively impact the entire job experience, leading to emotional exhaustion, lower organisational citizenship behaviour as well as diminished affective and normative commitment (Ashford et al., 1989; De Witte et al., 2016; Jain et al., 2021; Qin et al. 2022; Shoss, 2017).

More studies on job insecurity demonstrate that perceived job insecurity hampers the psychological health and well-being of employees leading to diminished time, energy and emotional commitment at their jobs, as well as increased turnover intention (Greenhalgh & Rosenblatt, 1984; Lee & Jeong, 2017; Lo Presti & Nonnis, 2012; Maslakçı et al., 2022; Ngo et al., 2023). Similarly, Baquero (2022) found that job insecurity increased significantly among hospitality employees during the pandemic. Employees who perceived greater job insecurity reported lower job satisfaction, higher levels of burnout, and lower engagement. Further studies on the impact of COVID-19 on the mental health of hospitality employees, indicate a rise in depression symptoms. Murray (2020) reported anxiety, depression, and compulsive behaviour like substance abuse after a job loss during the pandemic. A general perception towards the risk of contracting COVID-19 as a work hazard in hospitality is also regarded as an antecedent to depression, sleep distress and anxiety among hotel employees (Casagrande et al., 2020; Quin et al., 2020).

At the same time, positive HRM practices can provide the much-needed impetus for the revival, resilience, and perseverance of the hospitality industry to bounce back from the slump brought about by the pandemic. The extant literature on pandemic and crisis management in the past has significantly justified the role of HRM

practices in ameliorating the impact of crises on the hospitality industry (He et al., 2019; Giousmpasoglou et al., 2021; Ngoc Su et al., 2021). A study on the impact of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) in building psychological capital among hotel employees posited hotels that employ positive CSR activities have shown positive results on the psychological capital by instilling hope and optimism in their employees (Mao et al., 2020). When employees perceive organisational commitment by the management towards mitigating the COVID-19 pandemic through positive work practices and initiatives, this firmly establishes their faith in the system and creates a sense of hope and optimism (Wang et al., 2014).

There is ample evidence that role ambiguity and perceived lack of control over one's job as experienced by employees also adds to the mental distress caused during crises (Rizzo et al., 1970). In this context, various studies have indicated strategic measures that hotels can adopt to cope with the situation. Measures like designing and implementing specific training programs and strengthening internal communication channels can help overcome the sense of helplessness and ambiguity felt by employees (Hao et al. 2020). Similarly, to ensure employee physical and psychological well-being, the adoption of strict hygiene measures such as provision of protective equipment, medical consultation, employee training and awareness campaigns have improved organisational resilience and recovery of hotels during COVID-19 (Hao et al. 2020; Lai & Wong, 2020; Rodríguez-Antón & Alonso-Almeida, 2020).

The following section of this qualitative inquiry entails the elaboration on the methodology followed by the discussion section that summates and synthesises the participants' responses on the open-ended queries. The research further derives themes discernible toward HRM issues that also encapsulate the overall approach on the current investigation.

Research Methodology

Open-ended questions were adapted from relevant studies focused on HRM (Agarwal, 2021; Ashford, et al., 1989; Jung, et al., 2021; Kaushal & Srivastava, 2021; Napierala, et al., 2020; Ngoc Su, et al., 2021; Rizzo et al., 1970; Yan et al., 2021). Realising the evolving nature of the pandemic, the methodology to address the research problem at hand merited a subjective evaluation of the prevailing conditions. It is also because hotels are now facing mounting challenges owing to the prolonged pandemic. The qualitative inquiry thus holds potential and relevance in yielding deeper insights into the ongoing challenges of human resource managers.

Judgemental sampling involves an active selection of the most productive sample to garner appropriate responses and is advantageous in conditions where special expertise or key informants are needed (Marshall, 1996). Using this sampling

technique, invitations to participate in the qualitative investigation were sent to 46 individuals holding key positions in hotel human resource departments. As the sample was aimed have a wider geographical coverage, invitations were directed to hotels located in 20 different states of India. The research attempted to focus on high-end hotels, categories of which are determined via their star classifications. Consequently, most of the research responses were obtained from representatives of 4-star, 5-star and 5-star deluxe properties. After email invitations and follow-ups, a total of 17 interviews (representing 12 states) were conducted (36.9% response rate) between March and June, 2021.

More details of participants are provided in Table 1. The pandemic has necessitated the exploration of alternative ways of data collection, especially in qualitative research, and email interviewing has been found to be effective in conditions where participants are sparsely located (Saarijärvi & Bratt, 2021). Moreover, such asynchronous communication confers more time and space to reflect before responding (Saarijärvi & Bratt, 2021). The questions were presented in the English language, as it is an official language of communication in most Indian organisations. The data were coded separately by four authors and individually examined further. The participants were also cross-examined by co-authors to reduce personal reflections and arrive at mutually agreed themes. Generally, the majority of the participants had a considerable amount of working experience in their current organisations.

Table 1. Participants' profile

Participant	Designation	State	Organisation Type/ Category	Age	Total Experience (Years)	Experience in Current Organisation (Years)
R1	HR Director	Maharashtra	5-star deluxe hotel	43	18	9
R2	HR Manager	Himachal Pradesh	5-star hotel	48	27	16
R3	Learning and Development Manager	Bihar	5-star hotel	58	36	8
R4	HR Manager	Maharashtra	5-star deluxe hotel	41	19	0.9
R5	Director Human Resource	Tamil Nadu	5-star deluxe hotel	38	17	12
R6	Head HR	Rajasthan	4-star hotel	59	10	10

Table 1. (con't)

Participant	Designation	State	Organisation Type/ Category	Age	Total Experience (Years)	Experience in Current Organisation (Years)
R7	L&D Head	Gujarat	5-star hotel	45	23	6
R8	Assistant HR Manager	West Bengal	4-star hotel	41	20	4.5
R9	HR Associate	Haryana	5-star hotel	38	15	1.5
R10	HR Head	Delhi	5-star hotel	45	26	10
R11	HR Executive	Delhi	5-star hotel	33	10	9
R12	Assistant Manager HR	Assam	5-star deluxe hotel	32	11	5
R13	HR Head	Aerocity, Delhi	5-star deluxe hotel	38	18	2
R14	HR Representative	Tamil Nadu	5-star deluxe hotel	39	16	2
R15	HR Executive	Goa	5-star deluxe hotel	22	1	1
R16	HR Manager	Uttar Pradesh	5-star hotel	34	13	4
R17	Training Manager	Delhi	5-star hotel	31	10	2.8

Findings and Discussion

The literature on the impacts of crises on the hospitality industry highlights that whenever employees perceive a potential threat to their job and job opportunities, it leads to stress, anxiety, demoralisation, and job insecurity worries (Ashford et al., 1989; Jick, 1985; Romzek, 1985; Schweiger & Ivancevich, 1985). A set of open-ended questions aimed at understanding the impact of COVID-19 on perceived job security, perceived control on career plans and career growth of hotel employees, was thus exploited.

Job Insecurity, Uncertainty and Role Ambiguity

Several participants unanimously pointed out “uncertainty” as a major problem in the current hotel scenario. When asked about the prospects for career plans in the current conditions, responses like “*it is very uncertain to comment on this*”, “*it is a chaotic state*”, “*cannot say anything dependent on COVID situation*”, “*no one knows how long it will take to bounce back in full swing*”, indicated a sense of lack of control

among employees regarding their career plans. This resonated with the contention raised by Greenhalgh and Rosenblatt (1984), who highlighted factors arising out of organisational change that can lead to perceived job insecurity. Additionally, changes in the physical environment, downsizing, perceived physical danger, and role ambiguity in the organisation can lead to a feeling of lack of control over one's job and career, which further enhances somatic complaints, job dissatisfaction, organisational distrust and in turn leads to higher turnover intention (Arnold & Feldman, 1982; Smith & Kerr, 1953; Stogdill, 1965; Yin et al., 2022).

When asked about the future of jobs and career growth in the hospitality industry, one HR rep mentioned that *“employees have gone back to their hometown for the survival and started small businesses”*. Another HR representative pointed out the lack of job opportunities and layoffs in the hospitality industry to cope with the strain on businesses due to COVID, *“since business is low and doesn't seem to be normal soon definitely there will be reduction in manpower”*. Responses like, *“All of us feel that it will take time before the business comes back, job safety is a worry for the employees”*, *“first things must come to normal & staff has to come back to work, career growth is secondary”*, *“currently promotions and increments are on hold, so lot of people are trying for other industry”*, exhibit a grim scenario of growth prospects for career in the hospitality industry.

Greenhalgh and Rosenblatt (1984), in their theoretical model of job insecurity, highlighted the impact of perceived threats to jobs like lack of promotion and growth prospects on increased perceived job insecurity. Further, this model also establishes the negative impact of episodes like being fired or laid-off for short periods on the overall job stress. There is evidence of an inverse relationship between job insecurity and job engagement. To elaborate, employees with higher job insecurity are likely to have lower emotional commitment at work and this further depletes the mental and physical well-being of employees (Asfaw & Chang, 2019; Jung et al., 2021; Shin et al., 2016).

Employees' Risk Perception

Frontline hospitality staffs have faced inordinate challenges since the outbreak of the pandemic, resulting from potential exposure to infected visitors. This was further exacerbated by the conversion of several hotels into COVID-19 care centres. It was clear in the HR representatives' responses that as a result, many employees had undergone depression, anxiety, sleep disruptions, compulsive behaviour, and feelings of loneliness. However, they also shared that while many employees remained concerned about the exposure, some continued to remain optimistic. The perceived risk posed as a major challenge for the frontline staff during the prevailing conditions. However, the guidelines issued by the World Health Organization and various other

agencies engendered some confidence among hotel employees in overcoming the fear. Further, vaccination alongside preventative practices may have added to the reassurance among the workforces. Additionally, increased regular training and awareness programs with staff members helped employees understand and adopt prevention measures to arrest the spread of coronavirus.

Working Hours in Hotel Properties

COVID-19 profoundly impacted employee working hours in hotels (Goh & Baum, 2021). Hotel operations were affected due to the lockdown imposed by the government, which necessitated various adjustment measures by the management like reduced staff, multiskilling, work from home, leave without pay, reduced working hours, increased working hours and many more (Kaushal & Srivastava, 2021; Pandey et al., 2021). It was observed that due to the shift in the operations, the working hours of employees had to be modified. Depending on the operations of the respective departments, employees were categorised into different segments and their workload was decided accordingly (Shao et al., 2021). Most of the employees were put on leave and only a handful were called in to work on the premise with stretched working hours (Bagnera, et al., 2020). Employees who were asked to work were trained to multitask and perform additional work along with increased responsibilities (Kaushal & Srivastava, 2021).

Although the participants conceded that longer working hours and cross-training enhanced the confidence of their staff to handle varied tasks, for some employees, this led to increased stress levels and low motivation. This aligns with similar findings in literature (Chiang et al., 2010). For some employees, their workload was reduced or they were called in for reduced hours and, in some cases, they were called in on alternate days or as and when required. Results also revealed that employees who were asked to work from home were mostly those from the back of house (behind-the-scene) and could carry out their work from home without compromising any of the hotel operations.

Discernible from the examined responses, hotel employees can be divided into four categories based on their workload during pandemic (Figure 1). The first group encompasses employees who were expected to report to the hotel daily to maintain COVID-19 protocols. They were trained to follow the new safety guidelines, perform the additional work, and multitask. This category of employees was less in numbers and was allotted a substantial amount of additional work for ensuring standard operations. As an obvious outcome, these employees faced intense pressure along with challenges while working during the pandemic. However, on the brighter side, they were oriented to newer processes which have enabled them to shoulder novel roles and responsibility. The second category involves employees who were

asked to report on alternate days or twice a week as their workload has decreased and they were not required on a daily basis. This category of employees was also trained for multi-tasking but were utilised only when required.

The third set of employees was asked to either work from home or go on leave without pay. Employees working from home were given the option of flexible working hours but still complete the daily required working hours while employees who were asked to go on leave without pay were not involved in any official tasks. The fourth set of employees were asked to leave their jobs because of the adverse effect of COVID-19 on hotel revenues. In totality, overall working hours for employees was reduced, less operational work was observed, multitasking was emphasised, and new roles and responsibilities were allocated to the remaining employees.

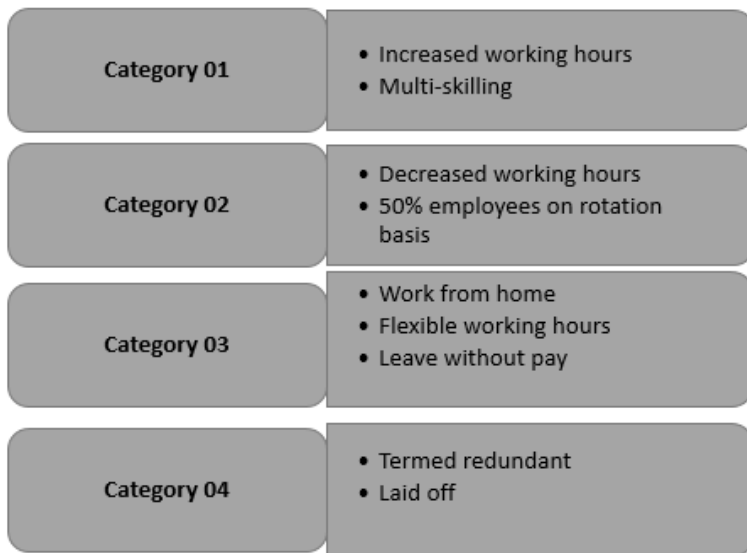


Figure 1. Emergent employee categories

Employee Performance and Customer Engagement during Ongoing Pandemic

COVID-19 induced significant changes related to employee performance and engagement with customers (Narayanamurthy & Tortorella, 2021; Ognjanovic et al., 2023); the hospitality sector was no exception. Most hotels changed their work processes in providing services to customers by imposing new protocols (Sharma & Kaushik, 2021), in the form of self-service, self-check-in, or conveying messages in the form of displays at the front desk. A perceived risk of contracting COVID-19 from customers was also reported by some of the participants. The possible infection

of COVID-19 and perceived risks from consumers were recently documented under four categories, namely, physical (risk of infection), psychological (stress from getting the infection), financial (higher prices for limited services) and performance risks (hotels' dismal performance) (Yu et al., 2021).

To this end, the findings clearly point that the first two categories, i.e., physical, and psychological risks, are directly attributable to the recent pandemic. In this regard, hotel employees who were asked to resume their duties, feared of being infected, but nonetheless, they started handling small groups with the necessary precautions in place. Of late, infection anxiety among hotel employees stemming from the COVID-19 outbreak has also been documented in a study by Park and Hai (2021). The authors reflected upon employees' pandemic driven anxiety and intrinsic motivation and how these factors have been instrumental in impacting hotel staff's service and helpfulness. Moreover, it was observed that interpersonal engagement with consumers was diminished because most of the interactions took place either online or through phone calls. Participants contended that direct customer service was acutely reduced, intensifying the deterioration of quality standards because of reduced human contact. As a coping mechanism, the executing teams were trained to provide services to customers with precautionary measures like maintaining social distancing, wearing masks, regularly sanitising hands, and opting digital mode for payments, as well as strictly adhering to the SOP guidelines laid by the government.

In comparison with the pre-pandemic epoch, services declined due to a gap in the delivery of personalised services to customers. Customer footfall reduced drastically in hotels which led to reduced direct interactions with customers (Bonfanti et al., 2021). It is also worthwhile to note that employee performance dropped because of the vacuum generated by reduced interactions with customers. Regretably, personal touch, a factor elementary to the hospitality services, has now become the most treacherous facet. Nevertheless, customers have gotten used to the changes practised by hotel employees because they are aware that it is for their own safety and well-being. Despite the fact that the altered ways of consumer engagement have affected employee performance, it could be argued that the workforce have swiftly become adept in procedures they may not have learnt or would have taken a longer time in learning. For instance, despite the health risks, hotel employees have been performing duties to ensure expected services are rendered effectively to their valued guests.

Overview of HRM Issues, Challenges and Measures

Some of the responses that gave explicit indications of measures being taken towards employee well-being are as follows:

“Regular counselling is going on for the hospitality industry to bounce back.”

“We are giving the training to our employees so that they are able to maintain their safe and healthy environment for their internal and the external guests.”

“We conduct one on one session for any employee who is anxious of their role and career. Regular town halls are being done where recovery steps of business are discussed along with challenges.”

These responses may be read alongside the works of Eisenberger et al. (1990) and Lawler (1986). Eisenberger et al. (1990) have drawn inferences from the social exchange theory while pointing out that employees perceive a sense of care and value for their work when organisations endeavour towards improving HRM practices during crises. Lawler (1986) in his High Involvement Model advocated the importance of providing employees with information and knowledge which leads to lower level of job stress and depression.

These HRM measures instil a sense of optimism and hope, which can be observed in some of these responses:

“May be situation is tough right now but will come back stronger.”

“Will be back to normal but it will take next two years.”

“Depends on how business /industry moves in coming months, we are all hopeful (sic).”

“Difficult times but expectation that things would improve in coming months.”

“Yes this is hard time for hospitality professional, as lot of people lost their jobs, but will have to stay positive, things will change.”

This indicates that hotel management or proprietors have been able to foster a sense of hope, resilience, and optimism. There are many evidences in the literature that organisations, in response to crises like the COVID-19 pandemic, are obliged to instil a sense of hope and optimism in their employees to develop and improve employee psychological capital (Mao et al., 2020). Improved employee psychological capital could lead to positive work attitude and organisational commitment (Avey et al., 2010; Karatepe & Karadas, 2014; Newman et al., 2014).

Further, as a remedial strategy, the interviewed HR representatives indicated some notable measures aimed at additional health benefits for employees. These measures varied according to the hotel brands and ranged from provision of specialised medical staff trained to handle COVID-19 patients, provision of expert consultation panel

on board, as well as support for employees or their family members in the event of an infection. Furthermore, such assistance also extended to necessary arrangements pertaining to the Rapid Antigen Test, vaccination of staff, and health cover insurance.

One reflection by one of the human resource experts is as follows:

Pandemic directly impacted the overall business, and the future of hospitality industry is also under clouds, so it is important to manage the operations with the minimum staffing. It also means cutting down salaries till an indefinite period/laying all contractual staff and permanent staff based on the performance matrix of previous quarters. The entire exercise is to make sure we have the right balance of staff as per current circumstances, and also when things improve, we still have a skill set retained and not indulging in a full-time hiring process.

Owing to the outbreak, several measures were incorporated in the usual operations of hotels and were periodically updated with the latest developments on the pandemic and the virus. The participants commented that safety and hygiene related queries mostly corresponded with national and international bodies related to the hospitality industry. Along with the protocols and guidelines recommended by the local health authorities, hotels started taking initiatives to restrict the spread of COVID-19 and bring back their business, on their own accord. Almost all the hotels, regardless of the operations and size, grasped the severity of the novel coronavirus outbreak. Hotel properties displayed concerns about employee and customer health, imposed strict social distancing norms, prevented direct contact with guest and staff, adopted strict hygiene practices in the premises and processes, as well as promoted digitalisation in most of their operations and management. However, this is not the first occasion that the hospitality industry has been compelled to follow such norms. For instance, during the SARS pandemic in 2003, there were similar challenges faced by the hospitality sector that bore links with health concerns triggering the implementation of hygiene and awareness protocols in many hotels globally (Lo et al., 2006).

Most of the common measures outlined by the HR experts to prevent the transmission of the contagious virus pertained to the following facets:

- Safe and hygienic environment
- Awareness and training programs
- Minimum guest-employee interaction
- Disinfection and sanitisation
- Health guideline compliance
- Advanced scanning
- Health and safety protocols

- The specific schedule for meetings
- Creation of bio-bubble
- Vaccine administration

The despair was palpable in one response, where the personnel reflected, “*We could not do anything for their families because of the heavy losses of the revenue*”. At the outset of the pandemic in 2020, hotels’ initial support to employees extended to various degrees, but with the realisation of a prolonged crisis, these existing efforts began to wane. While some properties assisted employees more tangibly (food, medicines, monetary assistance, jobs, accommodation, etc.), others were supportive in terms of intangible aspects (emotional coaching, counselling, work from opportunities etc.). However, some of participants’ responses could also be linked back to the helplessness and inability to extend help to neither employees nor their families (also visible in a response quoted earlier). The reflections of the senior HR representatives are summarily reflected in Figure 2.

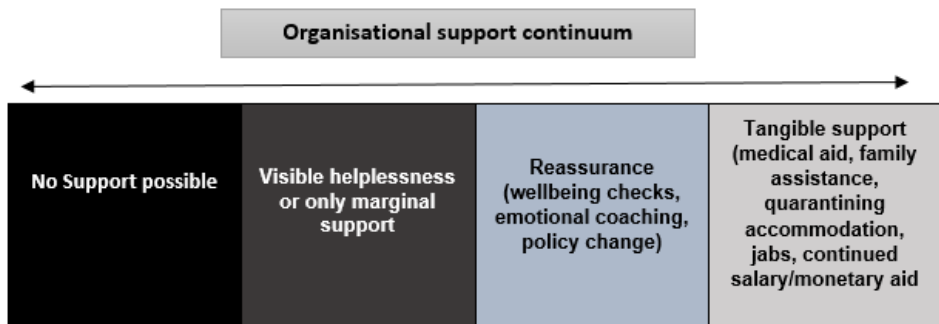


Figure 2. Continuum of support by hotels

Based on the study findings, Figure 3 summaries the HRM issues and challenges faced by hotel establishments during the recent pandemic. While the developing body of knowledge has been capturing these insights for over two years now (Kaushal & Srivastava, 2021; Lu et al., 2021; Park & Hai, 2021; Yu et al., 2021), the current inquiry has remained instrumental in revealing ongoing and evolving issues resulting from the prolonged COVID-19 pandemic.

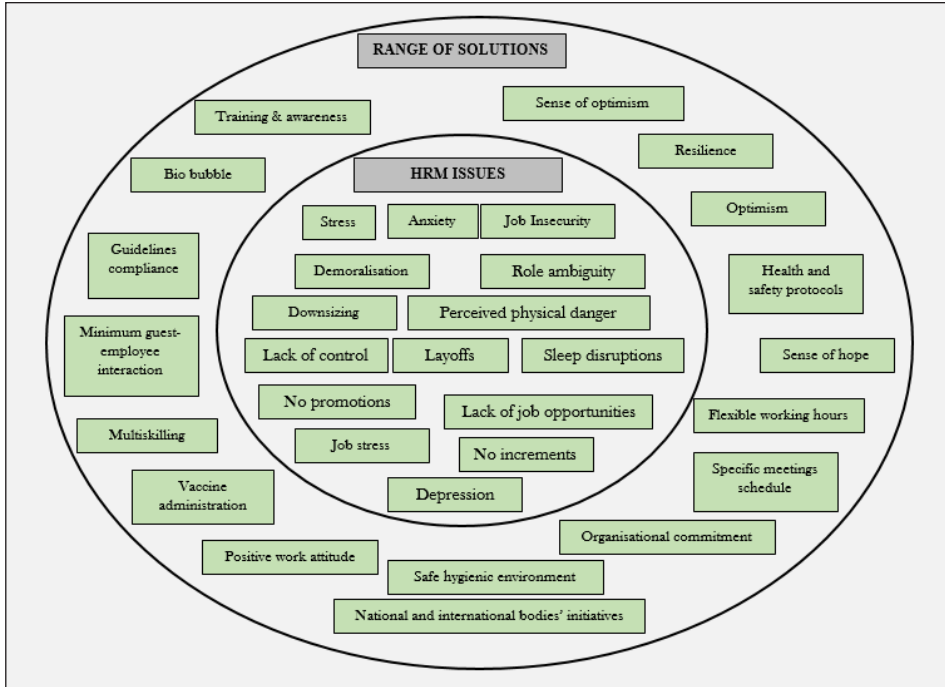


Figure 3. HRM issues and solutions

Theoretical Implications

The study extends the existing literature on the impact of COVID-19 on employees of the hospitality industry. While the existing studies have identified the exhaustive human resource issues during the pandemic, this study explores the perception of HR managers and heads of high-end hotels in some of the major cities of India, towards the physical and psychological well-being of their hotel employees, and the major thrust areas in terms of HR practices that can mitigate the impact of COVID-19 on their human resources.

The findings generated from the study outline three major areas in terms of the impact of COVID-19. First, a major impact on employees' job-related factors was identified. Various studies have posited that hospitality jobs are immanently hectic and prone to stress, resulting in job withdrawal behaviour (Karatepe & Aleshinloye, 2009; Zhao & Ghiselli, 2016). Further, this study postulates that COVID-19 has worsened the job characteristics for hospitality employees, making the job more tumultuous owing to layoffs, salary cuts, reduced manpower, multiskilling and multitasking, as well as increased working hours.

Second, the COVID-19 crisis has rendered employees vulnerable to physical and psychological distress. There is sufficient evidence from previous studies that COVID-19 has directly impacted the psychological well-being of employees (Casagrandeet al., 2020; Murray 2020). The responses clearly indicate a high perception of risk towards COVID-19 among employees coupled with a negative impact on the job characteristics. This further increased role ambiguity, job insecurity, lack of emotional commitment and job dissatisfaction, thereby adding to overall job stress as well as poor physical and psychological well-being of the employees.

Lastly, the study submits a range of solutions that can be adopted in general HR practices in hotels. There is an extant literature available on the role of HR practices in crisis management and enhancement of organisational resilience during crisis (Mao et al., 2020). The study findings indicate a sense of hope and optimism among employees despite the pandemic. This can be attributed to practices like, enhanced communication through daily briefings and town halls, clear instructions regarding Standard Operating Procedures, approachable leaders, adoption of health and safety protocols, vaccinations for employees and their families, along with emotional coaching through routinised well-being sessions.

Practical Implications

The hospitality industry suffered the brunt of catastrophic loss in the service sector, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. The hotel industry thrives on creating value for customers which requires staff to work in close proximity with customers through personalised interaction; this very essence of the hotel industry was significantly challenged during the pandemic (Baum & Hai, 2020; Herédia-Colaço & Rodrigues, 2021). The United Nations World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO, 2021) reported a global decline in international tourist arrival by 74% in 2020. In order to effectively cope and overcome the consequences of a pandemic of this scale, hotels need to evolve in terms of readiness for crises. Hotels need to rapidly adapt and re-design their operations, and add value to their human resources through training and development, focusing specifically on crisis management (Garrido-Moreno et al., 2021; Sigala, 2020).

This study highlights the key areas that were directly impacted by COVID-19 and further delves into the consequences faced by human resource management. Based on the findings, managers and policy makers can outline the major stakeholders of a crisis like this one and deduce a feasible plan for crisis management. At the time of writing, the industry has suffered an insurmountable setback during the two waves of COVID-19 and is preparing for the third one. There is still no clarity as to when the normal operations would resume. In this regard, the present study can become a basis for examining and strengthening the most vulnerable areas of HR and formulating a crisis response plan integrated with strategic HRM. In the long run, it

is recommended that organisations prepare leaders who can earmark priorities in the face of crisis. Strategic choices made with human conscience is critical in crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic. An evenly and justifiably distributed responsibility mechanism can ease the pressure off the subordinates who are the most affected due to the perils of a health pandemic. This is being chiefly substantiated via the findings of the current investigation which outlined the effects of the crisis on job roles and responsibilities.

To this end, a range of variables have been identified by this study regarding the impact of COVID-19 on HR issues and employee well-being. These issues are likely to have a disproportionate effect on the human resources in the hospitality sector, which poses additional challenges to decision makers. While little doubt exists pertaining to the compensation inequalities owing to the seasonality and relatively lower skill orientation of the workforce, a case for the criticality of an inclusive crisis management plan for similar future occurrences, is recommended. Future studies can be conducted to test the inter-relationship between these variables and develop models on crisis management in the hospitality industry through strategic HRM.

Limitations and Future Scope

The study aimed to cover as much geographical space as possible for improved sampling; however, the end sample only could cover perspectives of hotel HR personnel from 12 states. Yet for a qualitative enquiry, this study raises a word of caution in generalising the findings. As the study is confined in its scope to offer a snapshot of the state of HR issues and challenges, it makes no attempt at empirically studying the causal factors. For that purpose, quantitative studies may be considered, taking inputs from the current investigation. Further, the conditions of hospitality sector are changing, especially external factors like policy changes and bailout packages that are being initiated by governments. These factors too were not assessed in the backdrop of HRM practices. Finally, the study only focused on high-end hotels and attempted to capture the ongoing issues in that category of hotel establishments. Thus, further qualitative or quantitative studies may bring forth critical and wide-ranging concerns to the extant body of knowledge.

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