Research Article

Impact of National Measures Connected to Covid-19 Pandemic on the Hotel Front-Office Communication Themes

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Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic caused several changes in business operations, and influenced several processes in the hospitality industry and other economic sectors. Previous research was mainly focused on analyzing previous pandemics and creating recovery plans and strategies. The majority do not consider the shift in customer behaviour and the need for better employee training, connected to this behaviour shift, or the loss of highly skilled employees. This study focuses on the topics and themes of communication between clients and the hotel front office after the application of national and international measures of local bodies. Purposive sampling and in-depth interviews with 59 front-office managers, HR managers, and operations managers in Prague were conducted, emphasising the scope of this article. The findings of the research show the shift in the themes of communication and their quantity, as the employees were primarily handling the cancellation requests, stay moves or reimbursements and information sharing via phone or email. Regarding the soft skills development and perception, 75% of the respondents stated that soft skills are an integral part of employment, only 12% strengthened the skills of the employees by proper training during the pandemic, and less than 40% are planning to develop these skills in the future, as their main obstacle towards that now is the lack of finance.

Keywords: Customer Care, Hospitality Industry, Soft Skills, Communication Changes.

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Introduction

The Covid19 pandemic and national restrictions significantly influenced the current Czech hospitality industry. Based on the latest STR data, the Prague four and five-star hotels reached the occupancy level of 7, 5 %, and ADR (Average Daily Room Rate) of 1416 CZK, which is approximately 54, 37 EUR and RevPAR of 4, 03 EUR in December 2020. In the beginning of 2021, the Czech government brought back strict restrictions with a total closure of the leisure segment in accommodation facilities following the closure of the borders for foreigners (unless they have an important reason for visiting the Czech Republic). The hoteliers could attract only business individuals, which resulted in a significant decrease in the selling rate. As previously mentioned, national measures have been applied throughout Europe (Rodríguez-Antón & Alonso-Almeida, 2020).

The first articles focusing on the impact of the pandemic on hotel performance showcased the year to year comparison with previous years and future development perspectives (Hao, Xiao & Chon, 2020; Napiarala, Lesniwska-Napierala & Burski, 2020)

Excluding these financial and performance changes, attention should be focused on the other aspects of the Covid19 pandemic. It is assumed that the current situation will change customer behaviour, hygiene standards and customer care in general. Few studies focused on improving the hygiene level as a key to retaining hotel clients (Yu, Seo & Hyun, 2020) or guests perception (Awan, Shamin & Ahn, 2020).

This study's primary focus is on client-to-front office employees communication, the changes connected to the Covid19 pandemic, and the upcoming measures from the national government. The most important measures can be listed as follows: face mask-wearing, quarantine, mandatory negative PCR test for travelling and many other measures. Such restrictions lead to a significant need for information sharing, problem handling and ethical considerations (for example, when a client made a non-refundable reservation but needed to have it cancelled because of the quarantine or SARS-Cov-2 infection).

From this perspective, it is vital to understand the changes in client-employee communication and the main related issues. The authors approached the front-office, HR and operations managers to identify the main issues that the employees were dealing with before and during the pandemic and the influence of soft skills and their training on the hospitality industry in the Czech Republic.

Literature Review

When focusing on client-employee communication, one should understand the consequences of this communication. Lai et al. (2018) stated that service quality is directly linked to several other aspects like guest satisfaction and guest loyalty, where the authors are stating that the hotel staff should deliver a high level of service quality to hotel clients to build loyalty and achieve the appropriate level of guest satisfaction. From this perspective, it is crucial to understand the concept of service quality that can differ from one client to another,. However, there are several factors that can influence service quality.

Johnson (1995) focused on the service quality in connection to guest satisfaction, stating that only a high level of services can lead to service quality (when considering the combination of tangibles and intangibles as a complex product/service). He also mentioned that the determinants of guest dissatisfaction and satisfaction, such as the tangibles, service failures as well as the other staff skills and overall service delivery , could improve the overall satisfaction. The author builds the whole study on the SERVQUAL

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methodology developed by Parasuraman, Zeithaml & Berry (1988), where they reduced their previous ten determinants of service quality (model from 1985) to the final model of the most five influential determinants which are: tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy. From their study, it is essential to mention their motivation in finding these determinants, which was directly connected to employees and their satisfaction and motivation. Only these determinants can deliver quality service, which can lead to guest satisfaction and guest loyalty. These five determinants can be described as follows.

- **Tangibles** – the physical part of the product, including its equipment and the physical appearance of the hotel employees.
- **Reliability** – the ability to deliver a high standard of promised services accurately and dependably.
- **Responsiveness** – the ability to respond to hotel clients and their requests, help them, and promptly provide the needed services and products.
- **Assurance** – the ability to inspire trust and confidence by knowledge and courtesy.
- **Empathy** – the ability to understand the client's feelings and current situation, and personalize the services based on this knowledge.

The last two dimensions were created from the previous seven dimensions of the original model from 1985 which aggregate communication, credibility, security, competence, courtesy, understanding customers and access. Combining these dimensions with "Hospitality Intelligence" presented below by Bharwani & Jauhari (2013), it can be stated that there is a need for a high level of hotel employees' soft skills.

Shafiq et al. (2019) used the SERVQUAL methodology to understand the perception of Generation Y's determinants in Malaysia, where the tangibles are the only factors that are not having a significant and positive relationship with service quality. Sohail et al. (2007) presented different perceptions of service quality determinants, where the authors focus mainly on front desk employees and their attitude as well as the evaluation of the quality of the delivered services. Lee et al. (2020) analyzed online customers' reviews and identified the main factors influencing customer satisfaction, namely service quality, room desing and value evaluation while the brand and negative emotions in online reviews are negatively connected to the concept of quest satisfaction. On the other hand, Morego-Perdigón et al. (2021) state that branded hotels must pay a higher level of personal attention. The key driver is evaluating the value for money (this evaluation is mainly affected by service quality).

A limited number of articles focus directly on the communication between hotel guests and the front desk. Sayin & Karaman (2019) identify the main stages of hotel guests' stay and the interaction during these stages. The majority (76%) of communication with hotel clients happens during the reservation stage, only 14% during their stay, and 10% during check-out. The authors are also stating the main issues and problems from the clients' perspective, namely incorrect information, non-satisfactory performance of hotel staff, cultural or language barriers and individual guest-specific problems. During the stay, clients face the same structure of the issues as in the reservation stage. While during check-out, clients face failures in account calculation, lousy attitude from staff members, lack of communication regarding left items after check-out and check-out hours.

Kharouf et al. (2018) focused on the impact of practical communication concepts on guests' perception and loyalty, where the authors state that there is a direct and strong link between effective communication,

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trustworthiness and attitudinal and behavioural loyalty.

Knežević et al. (2015) and Islam & Kirillova (2020) are focusing on the non-verbal communication with clients, where the study of Kneževič et al. (2015) is mainly focusing on the effect of clients' appearance as the factor that influences the perception of the clients and the level of delivered services. The authors are stating that there is a strong positive correlation between the physical appearance of the client and the level of the delivered services. Islam & Kirillova (2020) consider non-verbal communication as a crucial part of communication especially in cases of different religions and gender, stating that employees should be trained to be more culturally sensitive.

Based on the previously mentioned results of published studies, it is clear that effective communication and other soft skills are significant determinants of guest satisfaction, which has a solid connection to the online reputation of the hotel and its overall performance.

Literature Review

The authors used the semi-structured questioning of front-office, human resources and operations managers of Prague hotels and other accommodation facilities. Since several hotels have been closed, the authors used purposive sampling and approached 150 managers from Prague hotels with a direct link to The Institute of Hospitality Management in Prague, which resulted in 59 verified and valid responses evaluating employees' soft skills, in-house training description and changes in "client- FO employee" communication.

The soft skills were derived from the description of "Hospitality Intelligence" of Bharwani & Jauhari (2013), which consists of the following competencies and skills (excluding Cultural Competencies) that directly affect the interaction with clients.

> Empathy, Effective Communication, Influencing Skills, Seeking and Assimilating Guest Feedback, Anticipating Guest Needs, Responsiveness, Flexibility, Conflict Resolution Skills, Team Playing, Emotional Resilience, Optimism, Commitment, Self-Awareness, Self-Management, Centricity of Guest Experience, Creativity and Innovation, Generosity, and Professional Behaviour.

These skills were evaluated according to their importance for front-office employees using the Likert Scale. The most important skills that were previously stated in this paper (Empathy, Effective Communication, Responsiveness, Flexibility, Emotional Resilience and Conflict Resolution Skills), can be seen in Table 1.

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Table 1: Evaluation of preferred soft skills

Skill	Average	Standard Deviation
Conflict Resolution Skills	6,763	0,429
Flexibility	6,729	0,691
Empathy	6,627	0,488
Responsiveness	6,610	0,720
Effective Communication	6,525	0,858
Emotional Resilience	6,508	0,504

According to this table, managers rated all the soft skills that are important for the front office. It can be seen that the skill to solve problems is identified as the most important for employees. On the other hand, the minimal differences in evaluating these skills as well as the low variability in the answers emphasize the need for a better perception of these skills and their importance.

To identify the problems in communication between hotel clients and front-office employees, the authors approached five hospitality professionals that identified critical aspects of this interaction (which was lately proposed to the respondents to find out the most common activities performed by front-office employees before and after the application of national measures to reduce the effect of Covid19). The following activities were identified, and respondents were allowed to state their options and unique activities. The respondents were asked to state the most common types of problems during and after stay connected to the front-office department.

> Reservation Creation, Reservation Verification or Change, Stay Information Retrieval, Check-in, Check-out, Service Sales During Stay, Additional Stay Information Retrieval During Stay, Problem Handling During Stay, and Problem Handling After Stay.

The same approach was selected to identify the main problems connected to hotel stays handeled by front-office employees. This study's key results are presented below, showing the significant shift in "client – front-office employee" communication and other aspects of handled problems and activities.
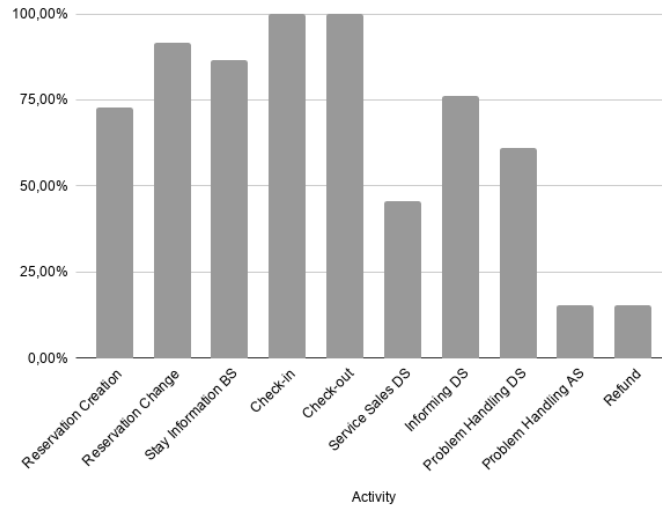
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Fig. 1. The proportion of activities handled by front-office employees before the Covid 19 pandemic

Figure 1 shows that all employees were handling in-house operations like check-in and check-out. Another critical group of activities was mainly connected to before stay and during stay activities, where the reservation verification of changes was the top activity, followed by delivering information to the client before and during the stay. Nearly 75% of the respondents stated that their front office employees handle the reservation (as they have their reservation department), and 60% directly handle the problems (FO managers of Guest service agents handle the rest). Contrary to these results, during the pandemic and the application of national measures, hoteliers and front-office employees dealt mainly with the following activities (as for the previous questions, the respondents were allowed to state more of these activities):
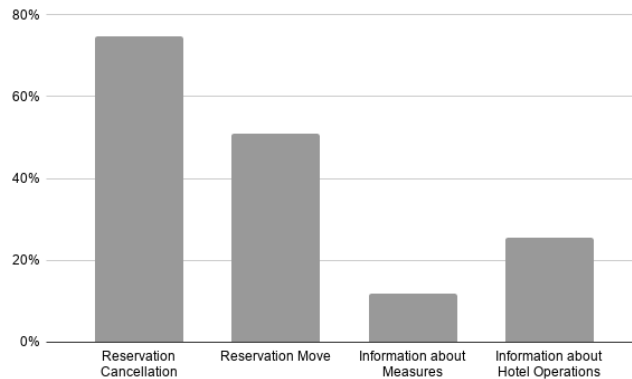

Fig. 2. The proportion of activities handled by front-office employees before the Covid 19 pandemic

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Based on the conducted research, it can be stated that before the pandemic, employees were mainly focusing on the hotel operations and disruption caused by noise, cleanliness, technical issues or current hotel reconstruction. After the application of national measures, the structure of the problems changed, and the employees needed to:

- Contact clients, cancel all confirmed reservations and inform the clients about any measures and possible reimbursement by the hotel.
- Inform the clients about the applied hygienic measures and ensure their application within hotel operations (mainly for business clients and also for non-business ones when they were allowed to be accommodated in Czech hotels).
- Ensure the adherence to the applied measures and observe clients' security and possible health problems (if the leisure segment was closed in the hotel).

To face the changes in activities, it was crucial to identify the patterns connected to hotel employees' training, where less than 12% of the respondents stated that they trained their staff to handle situations and issues appropriately. For 75% of the respondents, front office staff and their soft skills represent an integral part of their employment, but only 50% of the respondents test such skills before hiring their employees. Contrary to these findings, less than 40% of the respondents plan to develop their employees' soft skills in the future, as their main obstacle towards that now is the lack of finance.

Discussion

Undoubtedly, the pandemic hit the hospitality industry hard, and researchers are trying to identify the best way to recover

not only on the level of individual hotels and other accommodation facilities but also on the whole industry level. Herédia-Colaco & Rodrigues (2021) proposed that it is crucial to focus on health and hygiene as critical factors for attracting new customers during the hospitality recovery in upcoming years. Rodríguez-Antón & Alonso-Almeida (2020) propose the different market orientation for securing an appropriate level of hotel performance thanks to domestic travel. Pillai et al. (2021) proposed using modern technologies as a tool to maximize guest security and secure a high level of operations hygiene.

Future research would be based on the previous strategies derived from the recovery after other pandemics like SARS, MERS and others. On the other hand, researchers do not mention the need for highly qualified and skilled employees, driving the total recovery. The proposed application of modern technologies (Pillai et al., 2021) should be directly linked to the investment in human capital and employee training and development, as clients will still need help and instruction for technology usage. Information technologies are the drivers of the front office employees efficiency (Melián-González & Bulchand-Gidumal, 2017). However, there is still an urgent need for personal contact and interaction, while technology can be used to shorten the time needed to carry out administrative work.

Different market orientation must be prepared using the appropriate communication skills of sales employees. However, the high level of cleanliness and hygiene measures compliance would not guarantee hotel clients' great perception if these measures are not well presented and communicated with the clients. As Petricek (2019) mentioned, there is a strong need to distinguish the needs and wants of different

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groups of customers and use this knowledge in the decision-making process.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that the Covid19 pandemic influenced the whole industry significantly and brought a new range of issues and problems to be handled. Many hotels will terminate their operations, and many employees would shift to different industries. In the previous section, several strategies can lead to hospitality recovery, but all of them assume a high level of employees' knowledge and skills.

Hoteliers should invest in modern technologies, improve hygienic and safety standards, and improve their employees' education and development. As stated before, only the satisfied and well-motivated employees can deliver a high level of service quality, which can be considered as a must for the recovery of any hotel or any accommodation facility. From this perspective, it is worth mentioning the sustainable HR and learning and development strategy (Urbanova & Vrabcova, 2020), which should be created to speed up the recovery process. Creating such a strategy can support managers' development and improve their decision-making skills (Petricek, 2017) in various departments, as hospitality will face new difficulties.

For this study, the authors used purposive sampling, which could lead to a lower validity of the results. On the other hand, this exploratory study should be used as the starting point for more complicated investigations of front office activities and their prosecution from the perspective of education providers and hotel HR managers, as the whole industry is shifting due to the current situation and the different needs of upcoming generations. The authors also state that not all the hoteliers could respond to their questions as they are currently in difficult situations and trying to save their business.

Acknowledgement

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