
People management in Permacrisis: challenges and opportunities for the global hospitality industry

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Abstract

A prolonged period of global crises and contingencies known as permacrisis has caused major disruption to the global hospitality industry. The existing conditions have triggered several structural changes in the broader area of Human Resources Management. This paper investigates five people management areas that have been affected by permacrisis namely: staff shortages; talent management; managerial resilience; work-life balance and employee wellbeing; and fair work and worker exploitation-related issues. These areas should draw the immediate attention of the global hospitality industry's key stakeholders and policymakers. It is argued that these areas are the fundamental elements for the creation of a blueprint that will bring hospitality back on track on the road to recovery. In addition, a number of actions required for the industry's recovery are identified.

Focus of Paper: Theoretical / Academic

Key Words – Global Hospitality Industry, People Management, Permacrisis

Track – Managerial and New Work realities

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Introduction

In 2022 a new word was introduced to describe the era in that we live: Permacrisis. This new word comes from the merge of the words 'permanent' and 'crisis' that accurately portray the current situation globally from an economic, social, and political perspective (Turnbull, 2022). Global and regional events such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the implementation of BREXIT, and the war in Ukraine that triggered an unprecedented energy crisis, have created a challenging business environment difficult to operate in, regardless of the company's size, structure, location, and available resources. The service industries that rely heavily on front-line employees have suffered the consequences of the above-described situation. More specifically, the global hospitality industry has experienced radical changes and challenges in relation to major people management areas such as staff shortages and staff retention; talent management; managerial resilience; work-life balance and employee wellbeing; and fair work and worker exploitation-related issues.

The aim of this paper is to explore the effect of permacrisis on the above-mentioned people management areas in the context of the global hospitality industry. This explorative paper aims to summarise the key issues related to these five key people management areas and discuss the future challenges and opportunities for the global hospitality industry.

Staff shortages

Staff shortages were not unknown to the global hospitality industry, especially during periods of high demand. The massive redundancies and businesses closure due to the impact of COVID-19 in the market has caused unprecedented damage to the hospitality industry labour supply. Although the post-COVID era has brought a high demand for hospitality services and products, the industry struggles to fill the existing vacancies at all levels, seniority, and specialisations. The latest ONS (2023) data in the U.K. reveal that the available vacancies in January 2023 increased to 83% compared to the same period in 2019; it is estimated that there are approximately 174,00 hospitality jobs that U.K.-based employers struggle to fill (Figure 1). During the same period, in the U.S. there were nearly 2 million vacant posts in hospitality jobs (Bhattarai and Penman, 2023). Similar reports arrive from European countries with

developed hospitality and tourism industries; according to the WTTC (2022) one in five vacancies in the accommodation sector will remain unfilled creating a deficit of 842,000 workers.

Figure 1: UK Job Vacancies ('000) - Accommodation & Food Services Activities

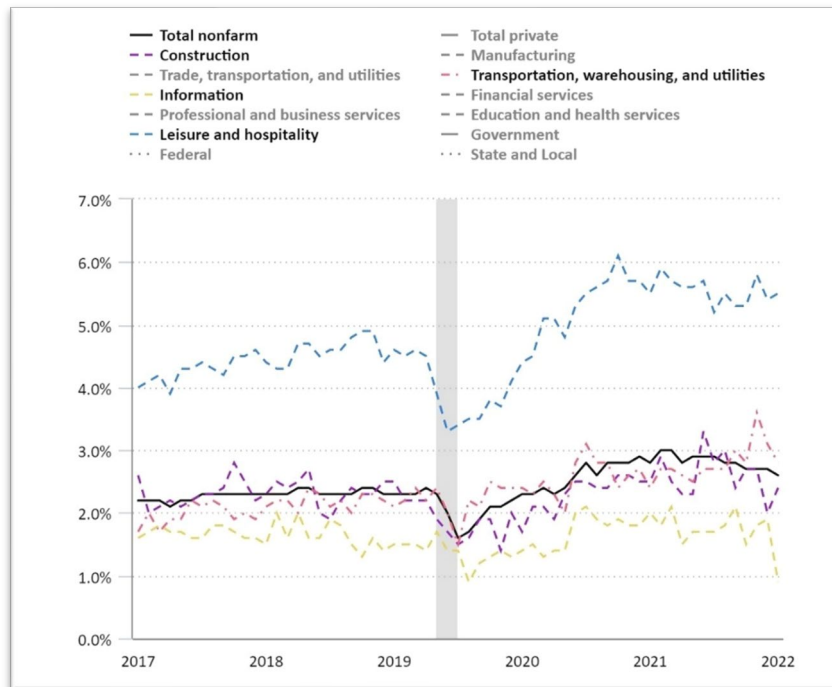


Source: ONS (2023)

It is argued that several causes triggered this phenomenon. A large proportion of those workers have changed sectors during or after the pandemic (Kwok, 2022). The unpopular working conditions in the hospitality industry including low pay, shift working, long working hours, and limited career progression opportunities have pushed many hospitality workers (especially the younger ones) to seek office jobs in professional or business services (i.e., law, accounting, and engineering firms), while others sought opportunities in transportation, construction, and warehousing (Bhattarai and Penman, 2023). Other reasons hospitality workers decided to leave the industry, were either to take early retirement or stop working to reduce health-related risks caused by their exposure to customers and other employees (Forsythe et al., 2022). It is also suggested that part of the 'lost' workforce died during the pandemic (Bhattarai and Penman, 2023). The unprecedented number of employees quitting their jobs during or after the pandemic has been described as 'The Great Resignation' (Ellerbeck, 2023). The hospitality industry is the leader in employee resignations in the U.S. since 2017 (Figure 2). Similar phenomena are observed in the U.K. and Europe where the hospitality workforce shrinks without any signs of recovery soon.

Another critical factor that contributed to staff shortages is the dramatic drop in the migrant workforce in hospitality jobs; during the pandemic migrant workers in Europe, Great Britain and the U.S. decided to return homes to reunite with their families and cope with the financial hurdles. According to the WTTC (2022) the migrant workforce in Europe and the U.K. was estimated up to 16% of the total hospitality workforce prior to the pandemic, whereas in the U.S. it was nearly 20%. The migrant workforce in the U.K. originates predominantly from E.U. countries (Ioannou and Dukes, 2021); the combination of BREXIT and COVID-19 resulted in a mass exodus of hospitality E.U. workers despite the creation of nearly 300,000 new jobs and the sector's ongoing growth (Big Hospitality, 2022). Staff shortages also hit hard the wider tourism industry, with the major disruption caused during the summer of 2022 in Europe and the U.S.; the chaotic scenes at major European and UK airports due to the staff shortages (Pole, 2022), is a very good indication of this problem's magnitude. The above discussion suggests that the global hospitality and tourism industry was not prepared for the return to normality in the post-COVID era.

Figure 2: Job quits rate 2017 – 2022 (U.S.A.)



Source: [US Bureau of Labour Statistics](#)

Talent Management

The hospitality industry has always suffered from a deficit in talented employees and managers. This deficit has grown unproportionally during and after the COVID-19 pandemic: as already discussed above the hospitality industry has been unable to stop its people from moving to other industries with better remuneration and working conditions (Liu-Lastres et al., 2023). The Talent Management debate in the hospitality context is a long-standing one and received several researchers' attention (Baum, 2019). Despite its popularity, there is difficult to define and frame Talent Management in contemporary hospitality settings and its shifting boundaries (D'Annunzio-Green and Ramdhony, 2019). The existing empirical research coupled with the industry's requirements, provide a plethora of ambiguous interpretations of what talent management is. Jooss et al. (2022) describe talent management as "*the process through which organisations meet their needs for talent*". Furthermore, talent management is often defined as a set of unique skills, attributes, and capabilities that contribute to the achievement of the wider organisational goals (Kruesi and Bazelmans, 2022). Based on the "unique" proposition talent is viewed as a strategic resource for organisations critical for the creation or reestablishment of the organisation's competitive position (Marinakou and Giousmpasoglou, 2019). In addition, the inclusive and exclusive approaches are the dominant strategies followed by hospitality organisations regarding talent management (Jooss et al., 2022). The former identifies all employees as potential talent, that can be nurtured as such through the organisation's training and development programmes (Johnson et al., 2019). The latter, views talent as a small exclusive group of individuals who can make a difference to the organisation (Mousa et al., 2022).

Regardless of the approach followed, it is argued that the difficulty to understand talent management, is created by the emphasis put on organisational or managerial needs rather than individual ones (Goh and Okumus, 2020). The fact that the existing talent management approaches and industry practices address mainly the organisational needs raises a number of issues experienced on a global scale. The existing research on talent management practices focuses on three key areas: talent acquisition, learning and development, and retention (Kravariti et al., 2022). The main criticism of these studies is that they were conducted in western multinational hotel chains ignoring the independent local businesses that occupy approximately 80% of the global hospitality sector (Jooss et al., 2022, Transparency Market Research, 2022). Another key weakness appears to be the lack of understanding of the talented employees' needs, especially the younger ones (Generation Z) that just entered or will enter soon the labour market soon (Goh and Okumus, 2020). Baum (2019) argues that we need to redefine the way we educate and train future hospitality leaders; he also suggests that the

current occupational culture and working conditions may not be suitable to attract and retain talent. Overall, the literature suggests that the hospitality industry in the post-COVID19 era is losing the “War for Talent” (Benedet and Nikolov, 2022), especially in younger generations who choose more attractive jobs in other industries or sectors.

Managerial Resilience

Any major event that can cause negative effects that threaten the viability of organisations, companies, or industries and is characterized by ambiguity of cause can be defined as a crisis (Paraskevas and Quek, 2019). The key element to overcoming and managing a crisis is resilience; in the hospitality industry resilience is regarded as a fundamental approach to responding, adapting, and surviving organisational or external environment changes (Hall et al., 2023). Brown et al. (2018, p.69) define resilience as the capacity to “*assess, innovate, adapt, and overcome possible disruptions that are triggered by disaster*”. Resilience is linked to both extraordinary and incremental change, whereas crisis management is linked to change that occurs because of extraordinary circumstances (Prayag, 2018). Key resilience indicators include elements of learning, risk identification, vulnerability assessment, proactive posture, planning strategies, and recovery priorities (Paraskevas and Quek, 2019).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the general managers (GMs) in hotels and restaurants were responsible for the implementation of contingency and crisis management plans. The existing research (i.e. Ghaderi et al., 2022; Giousmpasoglou et al., 2021; Filimonau et al., 2020; Lombardi et al., 2021) demonstrates their pivotal role on the road to recovery. A qualitative study among 50 luxury hotel GMs in 45 different countries (Giousmpasoglou et al., 2021), revealed that in times of uncertainty and crisis, luxury hotel GMs are vital in coping with changes and leading their organisations to recovery. GMs’ resilience and renewed role and abilities enabled them to adapt rapidly to external changes in their business environment. It should be noted that the best-performing GMs were the ones employed by multinational hotel chains which provided the GMs with adequate support and resources to deal with this mega-crisis. Those GMs employed in independent operators (mainly family businesses), reported that despite their individual efforts the results to support their staff and restart the business were poor, mainly due to lack of resources and/or the unwillingness of the owners to support their plans. Another study by Ghaderi et al. (2022) identified the importance of crisis preparedness in relation to managerial resilience. A proactive approach to crisis and organisational-level plans, help managers prepare for unforeseen circumstances and better respond to contingencies. This study also suggests that organisational resilience and organisational culture play a significant role in the development of effective strategies for different crises considering their severity and urgency. Filimonau et al. (2020) argue that the establishment and facilitation of CSR practices in organisational level, help managers become resilient and respond better to crises. Finally, a study in Italian hotels during the COVID-19 crisis identified the importance of resilient leadership and improvisation (Lombardi et al., 2021). The latter is used as a response by managers in the absence of planning using the available at the time resources, rather than the optimal ones. This is a common practice in smaller businesses or when the existing plans are not adequate to respond to a contingency or even a crisis.

Work-life balance and employee wellbeing

The discussion on the impact of work-life balance (WLB) and well-being on hospitality workers has taken a different turn during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. It is argued that the role of WLB is stronger in hospitality than in any other sector (Andrade et al., 2021); nevertheless, this is an area where poor practice is still observed, especially in independent operators. Work is a primary constituent of personal well-being as it provides income and signifies social status (Chandran and Abukhalifeh, 2021). Nevertheless, balancing work demands, and family-related responsibilities have always posed significant challenges for hospitality workers and organisations. Blake (2014) suggests that work-life balance includes the employees’ ability to successfully amalgamate work and family domains, functions, and demands. But how easy is it to achieve WLB for hospitality workers, employees, and managers?

It is well evidenced (i.e. Baum, 2019; Brown et al., 2015; Kusluvan et al. 2010) that the hospitality industry has always suffered a poor image mainly to the sub-standard working condition (i.e. long working hours, shift working, and health & safety-related concerns), low remuneration, and limited career progression opportunities (mainly in independent operators). As a result, organisations that fail to create and implement WLB programmes, experience low employee (job) satisfaction (Andrade et

al., 2021). Extensive research in this area suggests that hospitality organisations failing to create a positive work environment with high levels of job satisfaction experience high employee turnover, burnout, absenteeism, and low productivity (Kong et al., 2018). It is therefore imperative according to Chandran and Abukhalifeh (2021) to strike a balance between the employees' career and life goals. The introduction of family-friendly practices that include healthcare and childcare programmes as well as flexible working patterns for both parents, can have a positive impact on hospitality workers' well-being (Kim et al., 2023). The recent lessons learned from the pandemic demonstrated that the companies who invested money and time in their employees' well-being enjoyed a high level of employee retention, which in turn contributed to successful businesses' reopening. The existing research suggests that only the multinational or national hotel chains had the capacity to support their furloughed or redundant staff (Giousmpasoglou et al., 2021). This practically means that most of the industry, which is dominated by SMEs (independent and/or family businesses) (Jooss et al., 2021), has a long way to go in terms of facilitating effective WLB and employee wellbeing policies.

Fair Work and worker exploitation

The Fair Work agenda has always been part of the discussion regarding the improvement of the hospitality industry's image (Baum, 2019). The precarious nature of work in this industry (Alberti, 2016) poses one of the greatest barriers to the adoption of better work-related practices and the creation of a sustainable work environment. This precarity creates the conditions for worker exploitation in many ways in different contexts (Robinson et al., 2019). Worker (or labor) exploitation is recognised as a form of human trafficking (FRA, 2019) and refers to internationally criminalised practices that include poor working conditions and underpayment. From a people management perspective, worker exploitation is often a 'grey area' where it is challenging to identify the criminal threshold limits. According to Loyens and Paraciani (2021) this phenomenon is surrounded by moral and legal ambiguity, as there are blurred boundaries between those who can and cannot be identified as a victim. The European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA, 2019, p.10) defines worker exploitation as "*work situations that deviate significantly from standard working conditions as defined by legislation or other legal instruments, concerning in particular remuneration, working hours, leave entitlements, health and safety standards and decent treatment.*"

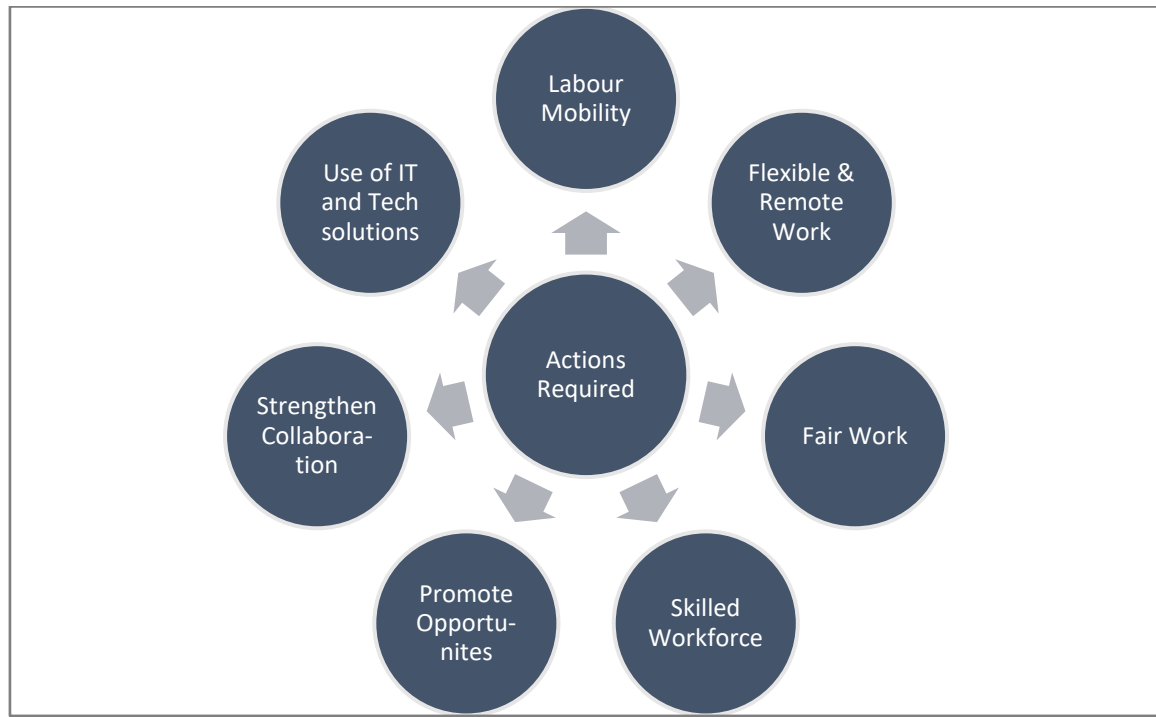
In the UK, these practices fall under the Modern Slavery Act (2015) with similar legislation existing also in the US. ILO (2017) reveals that worker exploitation and modern slavery are now more intense than at any other time in human history, across many service and production industries, including restaurant and food services, domestic work, agriculture, nail bars, and car washes. In these sectors, vulnerable groups such as minorities and migrants are preferred for lower-ranked and often manual jobs that need little or no specialisation. According to Mooney and Baum (2019), migrants are cheaper to employ, demonstrate a hard-work ethic, are easy to control, and are malleable; these characteristics make it easier for employers to manipulate and exploit the migrant workforce. Giousmpasoglou et al. (2023) argue that the COVID-19 pandemic created new forms of precarity in hospitality such as the so-called 'Dark Kitchens', that are difficult to control and regulate. Based on the above discussion it is evident that worker exploitation and the Fair Work agenda should be a top priority for the industry's key stakeholders and decision-makers.

Conclusion

This paper identified and discussed, five areas in people management that have been heavily affected by the prolonged period of crisis in the global economy. It is argued that these areas should draw the immediate attention of the global hospitality industry's key stakeholders and policymakers. These areas are the fundamental building blocks for the creation of a blueprint, that will bring hospitality back on track on the road to recovery and help restore its poor image. There is no doubt that priority must be given to policies and initiatives that will address the challenge of staff shortages within the sector. Among them are labour mobility and flexible working, the development of skilled workers, improving the perception of the sector, offering competitive employee benefits, enabling decent work, and leveraging digital and technological innovations (Figure 3). A government subsidy and tax relief can further encourage such policies. Furthermore, governments should identify the skills their markets require to achieve economic advantage, evaluate their availability, and determine whether existing policies should be updated and/or new ones enacted to meet future needs. It will take a multi-stakeholder approach, including higher education and the public sector, to achieve this goal.

In conclusion, it can be argued that the permacrisis must be viewed as an opportunity to reinvent the global hospitality industry. It is also suggested that this industry's stakeholders, have a moral obligation to future generations to create a sustainable workforce in a truly global industry.

Figure 3: Required actions toward the industry's recovery



Source: adapted from WTTC (2022), pp.7-10

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