
The general managers' role in luxury hotels, during the COVID-19 pandemic: evidence from 45 countries

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Abstract

The vulnerability of the tourism industry to natural catastrophes and pandemics is well documented, with scholars emphasizing the critical role of crisis management. Several approaches have been proposed focusing on the strategic macro-level perspective at the destination. In contrast, little has been written about the micro-level operational aspects at the establishment level and the role of general managers (GMs). This study espouses that GMs' knowledge, skills and abilities, fortified by their vast experience and resilience, are all vital to the survival of the business in times of crisis; it therefore seeks to explore the role GMs can play in mitigating the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the luxury hotel sector. Fifty semi-structured interviews were conducted online with GMs from 45 countries. Our findings, of interest to industry stakeholders, can enhance conceptual capital in this emerging field, and provide suggestions on how to reboot the sector on a global scale.

Key Words – General Managers; Luxury Hotels; Crisis Management; Resilience; COVID-19

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Introduction

The tourism industry, untenable in the absence of core elements such as safety, security, stability, and free movement, and reliant on the operational specificities of the hospitality sector, is vulnerable to incidents of economic, political and social instability, natural catastrophes and pandemics. The unpredictability and volatility associated with such incidents pose severe challenges, both at a macro and micro level; stakeholders must be prepared to mitigate ill effects and ensure the viability of the industry when disaster strikes. In recent years, the industry has faced challenges due to economic crises (e.g. the 2009 European recession), terrorism (e.g. the 2015 Paris attacks), political unrest (e.g. the 2011 Arab Spring), natural disasters (e.g. the 2004 tsunami in the Indian Ocean), war (e.g. the ongoing Syrian conflict), and pandemics (e.g. the 2003 SARS pandemic) (Zopiatis et al., 2019).

Despite the pivotal role of General Managers (GMs) during contingencies and unpredicted events, very few studies focus on the capacity and preparedness of GMs to effectively deal with a crisis. Responding to this gap, the current study utilizes the areas of crisis management, resilience, and human resources in order to explore the impact of the pandemic on the industry's operational norms, and the role of general managers (GMs) in both managing the COVID-19 crisis and planning contingencies for recovery.

Literature Review

The manager's role and its relationship to managerial effectiveness and performance are the foci of considerable research interest in hospitality (Giousmpasoglou, 2019). Tourism managers need to be well equipped and able to anticipate and prepare their teams for potential crises through mapping of potential threats, risks and vulnerabilities, and training aimed at preventing and minimizing damage (Chen et al., 2019). As noted by Pappas (2018), this is a complex process, since decisions during crises have to be made on multiple fronts, e.g. operations, marketing, pricing policies, etc.; all reflective of the industry's

interdisciplinary nature. Crisis management and resilience-building require the application of managerial expertise (Brown et al., 2018) across the board, but above all, they require the willingness and determination of managers to deal with the crisis itself.

Research suggests that disaster planning is a core function of hotel managers (Wang and Ritchie, 2012). In a study of accommodation managers in Australia, Ritchie et al. (2011) found that 75% of participants had undertaken training on disaster planning. In this study, hotel managers and employees were confident in their disaster management knowledge and skills, following a proactive training approach which clarified and alleviated potential role gaps during crises. Managers must perform different roles aimed at reducing the impact of crisis, minimizing adverse effects and steering the organization through the pre- and post-crisis phases (Wang and Ritchie, 2012). With regards to the COVID-19 pandemic, Sigala (2020) highlights the importance of strongly collaborating with external systems; hotel managers should, therefore adopt collaborative action and social bricolage.

Managers who espouse a superficial 'it can't happen to us' mentality, fail to acknowledge their organization's vulnerability to crises and the negative externalities that could be caused by their lack of crisis preparedness culture and planning. It is therefore prudent to examine the psychological factors of the individual in crisis planning, such as 'experience, values and beliefs, messages, personal attributes, social and cultural norms, attitudes and perception' (Wang and Ritchie, 2012, p. 1059). In a study of the accommodation sector in Australia, the same authors identified three factors in an individual's crisis planning behavior, namely attitude, subjective norms, and past crisis experience. Along the same lines, Bharwani and Talib (2017) added emotional and cultural intelligence, as well as interpersonal skills, whereas Racherla and Hu (2009) highlight the importance of collaborative knowledge-enabled crisis preparedness. Moreover, Haver et al. (2014) propose that hospitality managers should demonstrate emotional regulation – the ability to make good decisions in stressful situations – in order to control their own behaviour, as well as efficiently manage their teams' emotions. The same authors note that '*positive emotions are useful in achieving resilience by having faith to ride out the storm, handle anxiety and tolerate frustrations*' (Haver et al., 2014, p.154).

Methodology

Fifty semi-structured interviews were conducted online in order to reach participants from all over the world, corresponding to 45 countries. A convenience sampling approach was utilized via the lead author's extensive LinkedIn network (4,000+ connections). Jaccard and Jacoby (2010) suggest, online interviews are an effective tool for '*generating ideas about new explanatory constructs or generating ideas about the mechanisms underlying the phenomena [one is] trying to explain,*' (p.39). In order to simplify the coding process for the data analysis, each participant was given a number from P1 to P50 that corresponded to a unique response number (URN). Thematic analysis was conducted in order to expand our conceptual understanding of crisis management, resilience and the role of GMs in the luxury hotel sector. The interviews were analysed with clear intention and structure as the main purpose was to illuminate the study in an exhaustive way (Kvale and Brinkman, 2009). Themes and patterns were identified in the data to explain the phenomenon under investigation.

Most respondents were male (94%), aged between 45-55 (58%). The under-representation of female GMs did not come as a surprise due to the comparatively low proportion of women holding senior management positions in the hospitality industry. The majority of respondents (60%) reported to have had more than ten years' experience as GMs in luxury hotels. In terms of business type (ownership status), most of the hotels (60%) belong to a multinational chain, the rest being national or local hotel chains (18%), or independently owned (22%). At the time of data collection, 16 hotels were fully or partially open, 22 were expected to resume operations in the following months (July-October 2020), and the remaining 12 were uncertain as to when they would resume operations. Table 1 above, provides an overview of the GM profiles and coding.

Table 1: Participant GM profiles and coding

Unique Response Number	Coding	Hotel location	Gender	Age	Years of service as GM	Business Type
603601-603592-60814720	P1	Anguilla	Male	35 - 45	10 - 20 years	International Hotel Chain
603601-603592-61311252	P2	Algeria	Male	44 - 55	9 - 20 years	International Hotel Chain
603601-603592-60672461	P3	Argentina	Male	45 - 55	10 - 20 years	National Hotel Chain
603601-603592-60789114	P4	Australia	Male	35 - 45	5 - 10 years	National Hotel Chain
603601-603592-61056457	P5	BAHAMAS	Male	Over 55	10 - 20 years	Independent
603601-603592-60922789	P6	Bahrain	Male	45 - 55	5 - 10 years	International Hotel Chain
603601-603592-61044907	P7	Bahrain	Male	45 - 55	More than 20 years	International Hotel Chain
603601-603592-61050943	P8	Belgium	Male	Over 55	More than 20 years	International Hotel Chain
603601-603592-61195156	P9	Belgium	Male	45 - 55	10 - 20 years	Independent
603601-603592-60939580	P10	Brazil	Male	45 - 55	More than 20 years	Independent
603601-603592-60770365	P11	Bulgaria	Male	35 - 45	5 - 10 years	International Hotel Chain
603601-603592-60965294	P12	Canada	Male	Over 55	More than 20 years	International Hotel Chain
603601-603592-60855394	P13	Cape Verde	Male	45 - 55	10 - 20 years	International Hotel Chain
603601-603592-60851260	P14	China	Male	Over 55	10 - 20 years	International Hotel Chain
603601-603592-60919144	P15	Croatia	Male	35 - 45	5 - 10 years	Independent
603601-603592-61121649	P16	Croatia	Male	45 - 55	10 - 20 years	International Hotel Chain
603601-603592-61043990	P17	Cyprus	Male	45 - 55	5 - 10 years	International Hotel Chain
603601-603592-61090720	P18	Egypt	Male	45 - 55	10 - 20 years	International Hotel Chain
603601-603592-60698804	P19	Georgia	Male	45 - 55	10 - 20 years	International Hotel Chain
603601-603592-61161117	P20	Germany	Male	45 - 55	10 - 20 years	International Hotel Chain
603601-603592-61045991	P21	Greece	Female	45 - 55	5 - 10 years	National Hotel Chain
603601-603592-60837406	P22	India	Male	25 - 35	Less than 5 years	Local Hotel Chain
603601-603592-60856032	P23	Indonesia	Male	45 - 55	5 - 10 years	International Hotel Chain
603601-603592-60828300	P24	Italy	Male	45 - 55	10 - 20 years	International Hotel Chain
603601-603592-60764592	P25	Japan	Male	45 - 55	5 - 10 years	International Hotel Chain
603601-603592-60657734	P26	Jordan	Male	Over 55	Less than 5 years	Local Hotel Chain
603601-603592-60958858	P27	Latvia	Male	45 - 55	5 - 10 years	International Hotel Chain
603601-603592-60856284	P28	Maldives	Male	35 - 45	Less than 5 years	International Hotel Chain
603601-603592-61351597	P29	Malta	Male	45 - 55	5 - 10 years	Independent
603601-603592-60832355	P30	Mauritius	Male	35 - 45	Less than 5 years	International Hotel Chain
603601-603592-60726902	P31	Mexico	Male	25 - 35	Less than 5 years	International Hotel Chain
603601-603592-61260901	P32	Namibia	Female	35 - 45	5 - 10 years	Independent
603601-603592-61083158	P33	Nigeria	Male	45 - 55	10 - 20 years	Independent
603601-603592-60874925	P34	Oman	Male	45 - 55	More than 20 years	International Hotel Chain
603601-603592-61031765	P35	Oman	Male	45 - 55	10 - 20 years	Independent
603601-603592-60856210	P36	Philippines	Male	45 - 55	Less than 5 years	International Hotel Chain
603601-603592-60928767	P37	Portugal	Male	45 - 55	5 - 10 years	Local Hotel Chain
603601-603592-60994571	P38	Qatar	Male	Over 55	More than 20 years	International Hotel Chain
603601-603592-60921514	P39	Saudi Arabia	Male	Over 55	10 - 20 years	National Hotel Chain
603601-603592-61253034	P40	South Africa	Male	35 - 45	10 - 20 years	Independent
603601-603592-60978303	P41	Spain	Male	35 - 45	5 - 10 years	International Hotel Chain
603601-603592-60921729	P42	Switzerland	Male	45 - 55	More than 20 years	Independent
603601-603592-61044498	P43	Switzerland	Male	45 - 55	10 - 20 years	Independent
603601-603592-60768256	P44	Turkey	Male	45 - 55	5 - 10 years	International Hotel Chain
603601-603592-60818550	P45	UAE	Female	45 - 55	10 - 20 years	National Hotel Chain
603601-603592-60818913	P46	UK	Male	45 - 55	More than 20 years	National Hotel Chain
603601-603592-60985537	P47	UK	Male	35 - 45	10 - 20 years	Independent
603601-603592-61064582	P48	United States	Male	45 - 55	10 - 20 years	International Hotel Chain
603601-603592-61192941	P49	Vietnam	Male	Over 55	5 - 10 years	International Hotel Chain
603601-603592-60977000	P50	West Africa	Male	Over 55	More than 20 years	International Hotel Chain

Findings

The key findings presented below, reflect the COVID-19 impact in the luxury hospitality industry globally; the following themes emerged from the study's findings: Contingency planning and crisis management; Impact on GMs' roles and daily routine; Impact on the hotel's key functional areas (hotel operations, people management, sales and revenue management, and customer service); and Future predictions for the luxury hospitality industry.

The first broad area of inquiry was the overall hotel readiness to respond in a global scale pandemic; more specifically, the existence and implementation of crisis management and contingency planning in luxury hotels was investigated. In total, 86% of the hotels had crisis management systems in place, especially the national and multinational hotel chains. Despite the existence of contingency plans these could not capture the nature and magnitude of the COVID-19 pandemic, which due to the prolonged lockdown has also become a global financial crisis. Only two GMs reported pandemic specific plans, due to prior experience with SARS. Based on the GMs' views, the hotel operators responded very fast to the new situation, by adopting strict hygiene protocols and creating new operating procedures in order to make sure that customers and staff will be safe until the pandemic will no longer exist. Contingency plans in hotel business are also linked with insurance covering unforeseeable circumstances ('force

majeure') like wars, terrorist attacks, natural disasters and pandemics. Based on the findings, insurance companies did not recognise COVID-19 as such; one can speculate that they were either not prepared for this crisis or they viewed the crisis as a business opportunity.

The following area of inquiry on this study was the pandemic's impact on the GMs daily routine and their role during the crisis. As already noted, both in literature review and findings, the luxury hotel GMs are viewed as strategic human resources responsible for the survival of the hotel unit during contingencies and crises. The unprecedented disruption that COVID-19 brought into the luxury hotel business has affected the GMs' job in three different broad areas. First, GMs demonstrated strong leadership and resilience skills in order to support their staff and save the hotel unit from permanent closure. They stayed close to the hotel's employees, physically or virtually where the hotel was closed, and made the best possible effort to support and motivate them. All GMs acknowledged the value of employees in their job and overall in luxury hospitality business. Another area that GMs had to move very fast was the creation and implementation of the action plan(s), in response to this crisis as well as the reopening plans. These plans include new procedures, new or revised operational standards and reopening protocols; the GMs also led the staff training on the new procedures and protocols. The temporary business closure has had also an impact, both positive and negative, on the GMs' work-life balance. The positive effects of working from home has provided opportunities for learning new skills and spending quality time with family. On the other hand, the new work environment has caused negative effects including stress, anxiety and loneliness.

The COVID-19 impact on the hotel's key functional areas (hotel operations, people management, hotel sales and customer service) was also investigated. From a hotel operations perspective, an increased emphasis on strict hygiene protocols with higher impact on front-line staff due to the direct contact with customers. Food & Beverage and Housekeeping departments most affected by the new rules. Luxury hotels put a great emphasis in technology such as artificial intelligence (AI), use of robots and self-service technology in order to increase social distancing. In terms of people management, efforts made for staff retention with salary cuts and flexible working where possible. Luxury hotel business retrained staff during the lockdown, to acquire new skills and achieve cross-departmental functionality. They were also changes in working conditions, due to the implementation of safety measures and the new hygiene standards (i.e. face masks and special gear worn at all times). On the other hand, the crisis made it easier for employers to recruit talented employees due to high unemployment rates. Moving on to hotel sales and revenue management, a price war and the 'survival of the fittest' is expected in global scale. GMs' are responsible for the business survival, through the identification of new markets and the retention of existing ones. Traditional distribution channels (i.e. Tour Operators) are replaced from OTAs and direct internet sales. The hotels' sales efforts include information campaigns to restore customers' trust. Finally, in terms of customer service, there is a need to persuade customers that hotels are safe places to enjoy their stay without any discounts and radical changes regarding the provision of luxury services and products.

The future predictions regarding the luxury hospitality sector in the post-COVID19 era, provide very useful insights on the shape of the sector in the near future. GMs predicted that the sector will recover between 2021 and 2022. There regional variations, some places (i.e. Middle East and Africa) are expected to recover slower than others (Europe). The relaunch of the business is expected to bring product / service diversification in the luxury hospitality sector as a response to the new market requirements. As already mentioned above, GMs expect to increase the use of technology in hotels and sell more products / services like villas or serviced apartments that require minimum or no contact with staff. It is not a surprise that GMs appear optimistic, despite the detrimental impact of COVID-19 to luxury hospitality. Overall, most participants believe that the sector will be able to recover soon. This positive attitude on behalf the GMs and their teams will be required in order to relaunch the luxury hospitality sector in the post-COVID-19 era. A summary of the key findings can be viewed in Table 2.

Table 2: Summary of key findings

<p>Crisis management & Contingency planning</p>	<p><u>Hotel readiness</u>: 7 out of 50 business (14%) had no crisis management or contingency plans in place at all; the majority of hotels had generic plans, (no COVID-19 specific); only 2 hotels had fit-to-purpose plans due to experience with other pandemics.</p> <p><u>Hotel Response</u>: immediate response to guidelines, rules and legislation – creation of new procedures and hygiene protocols</p> <p><u>Insurance companies' role</u>: denial to recognise the pandemic as 'force majeure'; updated policies for extra coverage with high premiums and revised / new contracts.</p>
<p>Impact on GMs' roles and daily routine</p>	<p><u>Resilience & Leadership</u>: strong GMs' leadership during this crisis; stayed close to staff and made best possible effort to support and motivate them; GMs acted as change agents.</p> <p><u>New procedures, operational standards and re-opening plans</u>: GMs in charge of creation and implementation of the action plan(s), in response to the crisis</p> <p><u>GMs' Work-Life Balance</u>: positive effects from temporary business closure include learn new skills and spend quality time with family; negative effects include stress, anxiety and loneliness.</p>
<p>Impact on the hotel's key functional areas</p>	<p><u>Hotel operations</u>: increased emphasis on strict hygiene protocols; higher impact on front-line staff; Food & Beverage and Housekeeping departments most affected by the new rules; emphasis in technology in order to increase social distancing.</p> <p><u>People management</u>: staff retention with salary cuts and flexible working; retrain staff during the lockdown to acquire new skills and achieve cross-departmental functionality; changes in work environment due to new hygiene standards; easier for employers to recruit talent due to high unemployment.</p> <p><u>Sales and revenue management</u>: price war and the 'survival of the fittest' in sales; GMs' held responsible for the business survival; increased use of OTAs and direct internet sales; Sales efforts linked to information campaigns aiming to restore customers' trust.</p> <p><u>Customer Service</u>: persuade customers that hotels are safe places to enjoy their stay without affecting their customer experience.</p>
<p>Future predictions for the luxury hospitality industry</p>	<p><u>Duration of crisis and sector recovery</u>: sector recovery between 2021 and 2022; regional variations, with some places (i.e. Middle East and Africa) expected to recover slower than others (Europe).</p> <p><u>Product / service diversification</u>: reinventing business model; increase the use of technology in hotels; sell products/services like villas or serviced apartments that require minimum or no contact with staff.</p> <p><u>Business survival & Resilience</u>: moderate optimism despite the detrimental impact of COVID-19 to luxury hospitality; overall, GMs believe the sector is resilient to crises and capable to recover soon.</p>

Conclusion

Early findings from COVID-19-related tourism research challenge industry operational norms and enhance our horizons on new and innovative ways of not only overcoming the current crisis but also reshaping the future of the industry (Sigala, 2020). Future research should focus on the structural and transformational changes necessary to guide the industry out of the 'storm' and into a new normality (Gossling et al., 2020). The current study, which focuses on the GM's role in managing the crisis, suggests that future endeavours should espouse a more human-centered paradigm, especially with regards to resiliency building. In a nutshell, a new business model in the luxury hospitality sector will need to be adopted in the post-COVID-19 era.

COVID-19 research is quite new and requires fast and real-time applied outcomes, aimed at verifying and benchmarking the effectiveness of responses and recovery strategies adopted by industry operators (Sigala, 2020). Although the nature and magnitude of the COVID-19 pandemic has not yet

been captured, this study found that GMs are prepared to engage in crisis planning and management by relying on their previous experience and their business contingency plans. Our findings, aligned with Wang and Ritchie (2012), suggest that, to build resilience and perform crisis management, luxury hotels should take action at three different levels. Prior to a crisis, GMs must develop a proactive human centered HRM strategy and a detailed crisis management plan and provide employees with the necessary training to effectively deal with such eventualities. During the crisis, they should be proactive, and able to communicate and collaborate with external systems. Finally, following the crisis, systems should be put in place to measure, evaluate, and learn from actions taken.

As the hospitality and tourism industry is faced with constant changes, GMs are ready to deal with such events (Sigala, 2020). Interestingly, but not surprisingly, the role of the GM has been impacted by the pandemic in positive ways too. The key roles prevailing in the situation were identified as leadership, work-life balance and managing stress, crisis management, teambuilding, and resilience-building. It is also clear that traditional leadership, recruitment and motivation are not appropriate for such crisis situations; instead, GMs must employ innovative methods to inspire, engage and motivate employees, especially in lockdown and remote working conditions. Managers comprehend the impact of the crisis on employees and understand their own influence on resilience and organizational readiness for change in turbulent environments. In addition, further training and professional development is required: GMs are using the lockdown for personal and professional development, and at the same time offering training to staff to build resilience. GMs must act as role models, be flexible, demonstrate adaptable work attitudes (i.e. by physically or virtually supporting staff), enhance their communication and interpersonal skills, coach teams, and exhibit emotional intelligence in handling anxiety and stress. GMs are capable of 'thriving in chaos' and guaranteeing business survival and prosperity, as well as demonstrating entrepreneurial skills to identify new and effective streams of revenue. Their experience, skills and pragmatic view of the world are critical factors for the continuation of hotel operations even in extremely difficult times and during unprecedented events such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Emphasis is placed on staff preparedness with training on quality customer service and new policies and protocols.

In contrast to most studies, we propose that GMs consider the current crisis as an opportunity. While the increased use of technology is often seen as a challenge (Eide et al., 2017), GMs in this study see it as a tool to better communicate with stakeholders and increase revenue in a difficult time e.g. by identifying new markets and segments. Furthermore, despite the detrimental impact of the pandemic on employment and the loss of jobs, GMs in this study benefit from the current labour market conditions by the availability of a larger talent pool, and through the development of more resilient teams. Resilient teams are attentive to work processes and can demonstrate crisis preparedness and adaptability to stress and challenges (Brown et al., 2018).

The GMs' predictions regarding the luxury hospitality sector in the post-COVID-19 era provide useful insights on the shape of the sector in the near future. GMs were very optimistic and suggested that the sector will recover between 2021 and 2022. As the sector and GMs quickly adapt to the changing market conditions and consumer preferences, they demonstrate resilience to unforeseeable events of global magnitude. Regional variations were identified, with some places (i.e. the Middle East and Africa) expected to recover slower than others (Europe). When business operations in the luxury hospitality sector resume, they are expected to promote more diversified products / services as a response to new market requirements.

The provision of luxury hospitality services is evolving as a response to the new market requirements and needs that have emerged from the COVID-19 pandemic. This evolution will – in the short-term – cost many jobs that will be partially replaced by new technologies. More exclusivity and less direct contact with customers is expected to become the new norm. Heightened market competition, in conjunction with the global economic crisis that will follow the pandemic, will result in the survival of those companies best prepared for this crisis. Hence, we will likely see new players emerging on the global scene, while others will disappear. The true winners will be the customers who will receive more attention, better quality of service and greater value for money.

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