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IMPLICATION OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT IN TOURISM AND HOSPITALITY

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Abstract: Human resource management is an area of business that, after decades of unfair neglect, has finally taken its rightful place. The importance of human resources is especially evident in all organizations that make contact with customers of their products or service users through their employees, as a key segment of human resources. This is the case with tourism, and therefore the management of human resources in tourism is important for the business success of organizations in this field. This is especially evident in crisis situations, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, which has hit tourism globally. The application of this concept was found to be crucial from several perspectives. First, in relation to employees who were faced with the possibility of losing their jobs, due to cancellation of tourist trips, closure of hotels and restaurants, and second, in relation to users of tourist services, who faced a new situation, which involved uncertainty and fear for their own health. It is the complexity of the situation, but also the danger to public health that has created new challenges for those involved in human resource management. New circumstances create new approaches to overcoming problems.

Key words: human resources management, tourism and hospitality, COVID-19.

INTRODUCTION

Employee quality is a new dimension that is considered when determining the value of an organization. Until recently, this was not the case, ie investing in staff development was not a priority, given that their contribution to increasing the value of the organization was not considered. However, research on the impact of the human resource management function on the business result of companies in recent decades is one of the basic research topics in the field of human resource management

(Tadic, 2014, 146). In order to determine the contribution of human resources to the success of the organization, it is important that this function is not viewed in isolation from others. In this paper, however, the emphasis will be on the influence of employees for overcoming crisis situations, such as a pandemic that has affected several sectors, not only the tourism sector. However, it is evident that this sector is the most significantly affected. The tourism sector is otherwise considered a sector that is extremely sensitive to crisis situations, regardless of their cause.

Tourism has previously faced crisis situations such as natural disasters (floods, tsunamis, fires), war conflicts, economic crises. What makes the current crisis different from the previous ones is that it did not affect the tourism sector of a certain country or a region. This time, tourism on a global scale is at stake.

The stalemate occurred almost overnight. Numerous trips have been canceled, many countries have closed their borders to citizens of other states. Air traffic, as closely related to tourism, has also been suspended, which has directly affected tourism. The stagnation in the tourism sector further spilled over into the hotel and restaurant business. Also, museums, galleries, theaters and cinemas have suspended their activities. The world's biggest festivals have not been held. Such changes have conditioned the need for a different management of human resources.

The tourism sector, as well as the hotel sector, are greatly influenced by the human factor, given that employees are those who are in direct contact with users of tourism and hotel services. Therefore, human resource management in these sectors is necessary. Poor quality of provided services will negatively affect the reputation of the destination or hotel.

A COVID-19 pandemic has been propagating in China and in the entire globe; the pandemic risk has not been confined only to threaten lives due to infection, but also has inflicted a humongous psychological pressure (Cao et al, 2020, 2). The epidemic threatens entire business processes, supply chains, and even human health and life. Therefore, risk management strategies have to include plans for safety and protection of personnel (Ilic-Kosanovic, Tomađević & Ilic, 2020, 78). This paper will discuss the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on tourism, and especially on the human resource management process, with a proposal for measures to overcome the crisis.

1. IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON TOURISM AND HOSPITALITY

Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) is an infectious disease caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus (World Health Organization [WHO], 2021). A larger number of people infected with the new virus first appeared in China, which was reported to the WHO

in December 2019. All patients had similar symptoms – fever, cough, tiredness, loss of taste or smell.

As early as February 2020, the WHO declared a pandemic of global proportions. The virus first spread through China, and was soon transmitted to Italy. This country has become one of the most severely affected countries in Europe in terms of the number of deaths, exposure to the health sector, exposure to the country's economy and especially exposure to the tourism sector. The tourism sector of this country experienced a significant decline during 2020. More than 300,000 people lost their jobs. The number of visitors from foreign countries has been drastically reduced. Fashion shows have been postponed, restaurants and shopping malls were closed, just like theaters and cinemas, football stadiums have been left empty. Total contribution of Travel & Tourism sector to Italian GDP in 2019 was 13,1%, while that percentage in 2020 decline to 7,0% (World Tourism & Travel Council [WTTC], 2020). It is not just the tourism sector in Italy that has suffered such drastic consequences from the corona virus. The Travel and Tourism sector suffered a loss of almost 4.5 trillion American dollars to reach 4.7 trillion dollars in 2020, with the contribution to GDP dropping by a staggering 49.1% compared to 2019; relative to a 3.7% GDP decline of the global economy in 2020 (WTTC, 2020). According to the WTTC, the share of tourism in global GDP in 2019 was 10,4%, while that percentage for 2020 was almost halved and amounted to 5,5% (WTTC, 2021).

In the Republic of Serbia, the first case of COVID-19 was registered on March 6, 2020 and the epidemic is still ongoing (<https://covid19.rs/>). Until today (October 19, 2021), over one million patients with coronavirus have been registered in Serbia, while 9,214 have died as a result of coronavirus infection (<https://covid19.rs/>). The Serbian economy, as well as its tourism and hospitality sectors, have suffered significant consequences from the corona virus crisis. Tourism and Travel contribute to Serbian GDP with 5,8% in 2019, while in 2020 it contributes with an even smaller percentage of 2,8% (WTTC, 2021). The largest decline in the number of overnight stays of tourists in accommodation facilities in Serbia was recorded during April and May 2020. This can be justified by the fact that these are the months in which the curfew prevailed in Serbia, and this is one of the reasons for the reduced number of tourist trips on the territory of Serbia. A significant increase in the number of overnight stays in 2020 occurred during the month of August, with overnight stays realized to a much greater extent by domestic tourists (Republički zavod za statistiku, 2021).

In addition to Europe, the corona virus has affected the tourism and hospitality sectors in other regions of the world. The largest decline in the tourism sector, observed in terms of revenues in billions of dollars in 2020 compared to 2019 was realized in the Caribbean (-58%), then in the Asian part of the Pacific (-53,7%),

Europe (-51,4%) and the Middle East (-51,1%), Africa (-49,2 %), North America (-42,2%) and South America (-41,1%) (WTTC, 2020). Looking at the number of employees in the field of tourism who lost their jobs due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the most difficult situation is in Africa, where as many as 7.2 million people (29.3%) lost their jobs, similar to North America (7.1 million people lost their jobs -27.9%) (WTTC, 2020). India is also significantly affected by the corona virus, due to the large population, hygienic conditions, but also due to certain cultural specifics. According to industry chamber CII, this is the one of the worst crises ever to hit the Indian tourism industry impacting all its geographical segments - inbound, outbound and domestic, almost all tourism verticals - leisure, adventure, heritage, cruise, corporate and niche segments (The Economic Times, 2020).

The drastic drop in business has forced many hotels into a minimum level of operation. On 28th March, the Wujiang Hotel Chain, an emerging hotel chain that was formed under the investment of C-trip, was the first hotel chain to collapse in this crisis. Hotel occupancy globally is down 42% year-over-year with roughly 80% of hotel rooms empty (Mijinke, 2020).

2. HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT IN TOURISM AND HOSPITALITY SECTOR

As indicated earlier in the paper, human resource management has not been adequately addressed until recently, which was primarily due to a lack of understanding of the contribution of human resources to the organization's business results and overall performances. Human resource management is most often equated with the personnel function. The similarities between human resource management and the personnel function arise from the activities by which the management function, ie. the management process and the personnel function are realized and confirmed (Cerovic, 2019, 10). It is about performing jobs and tasks related to tasks and activities aimed at employees and their potentials in order to achieve the goals of the organization. However, the differences between the personell function and human resource management must not be ignored. It is precisely the disregard for these differences that leads to the non-exploitation of the full potential of human resources.

The continuous need for positioning in relation to the competition creates the need for continuous improvement of human resources which are becoming a key resource of organizations. Trends present in the 20th and 21st century affect the way of performing daily activities, business, human resources in general, but also the management of human resources in the tourism and hospitality sector. These new circumstances have a double effect on human resource management. On the one hand, there is a trend of greater involvement of employees in management and

decision-making processes, while working and employment conditions are improving. The development of information and communication technology, as well as the overall technical and technological development have influenced the way of performing tourist and hotel activities. E-mail, mobile telephony, automation of business tasks took a larger part.

Human resource management in the hotel industry implies the constant presence of aggravating factors such as the need for great flexibility of employees, willingness to perform more different work tasks, lower salaries of employees at lower hierarchical levels, frequent job losses and the like. Therefore, one of the key challenges for managers in charge of human resources is the need to create a base of loyal employees. We come to the conclusion that employees are the main factor of business success, because in order to satisfy the users of the services, the employees must invest complete personality, knowledge and effort (Blagojevic & Lakic, 2021, 440). Management of human resources should neutralize negative characteristics of employees and positive ones should recognize, activate and direct them in the right way. People are a key business resource that requires more knowledge and skills than managing other resources, and is extremely important for organizational success (Stefanovic & Blagojevic, 2009, 305). Assuming that all other resources are identical, the competitive advantage will be achieved by the organization whose human capital is most valuable. The role of human resource management is reflected in the proper organizing the company's activities, to hire the right people in the right place, that employees have the opportunity for training and progress, to be motivated and rewarded and to do their job best they can in order to achieve results for the company. The role of human resources managers in tourism is specific, because they are the ones who represent the link between employees and visitors/guests. The manager must have authority in accordance with the level of responsibility, to encourage and guide associates and not just to give orders. Relying on their own authority, managers establish good communication based on the information needed for successful realization of the set goals (Sekaric, Stanic, Kostic & Sekaric Sotirovski, 2015, 543).

It is precisely the specificity of services in general that leads to the great importance of HR in tourism and hospitality. Namely, the services are intangible and cannot be stored. Another important feature of services is that they are often inseparable from their provider. For example, checking in at the reception requires direct contact with employees upon entering the hotel, and this is the moment when guests or visitors get the first impression of the quality of service and the hotel itself. It is not desirable for guests to find an empty reception desk, wait too long, cannot get the necessary information or meet unfriendly staff.

3. HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT IN TOURISM AND HOSPITALITY SECTOR DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Typically delighted by a complimentary beverage in the lobby during check-in, hotel guests of the future might be even more excited to be treated to unlimited hand sanitizer (Mijinke, 2020). The reason for this can be assumed. Circumstances have changed significantly, and for the vast majority of people, health comes first. Many organizations within the industry are vulnerable, since the product or service is not vitally essential for the end-clients and they can choose an alternative or cease making an effort to purchase touristic product/service (Draskovic & Džunic, 2020, 448). In order to remain resilient in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is essential for organizations in the Travel, Hospitality and Leisure industry to look innovatively at their workforce (Mijinke, Kiewik & Brouwer, 2021).

Generally, a crisis affecting tourism manifests as an event or set of circumstances that compromise or damage the market potential and reputation of a tourism business or an entire region (Council of Australian Tour Operators [CATO], 2016). The pandemic that has hit the planet poses a danger to the health of employees and visitors/guests, thus posing a new challenge for most human resource managers. In the business of organizations, crisis situations are inevitable, which opens the need for the implementation of crisis management activities. Although a crisis response plan already exists in many organizations, it is likely that a pandemic was not foreseen by them, or that most managers have not encountered a pandemic so far. Active crisis management is aimed at proactively predicting a future crisis, developing and implementing prevention measures and preparing an action plan for accurate steps in case of a crisis (Waller, Lei & Pratten, 2013, 209).

Human Resource departments had a difficult job prior to the pandemic. In 2019, more than 50% of HR leaders struggled to ensure that employees had the skills necessary to navigate an increasingly digitized workplace (Bingham, 2020). The pandemic has also caused changes in the work environment. Namely, it has become necessary to reduce contact among employees, and many organizations have provided either flexible working hours or work from home. This made it possible to reduce stress for employees, made it easier for them to reconcile work obligations with obligations outside work (for example, babysitting due to the closure of schools and kindergartens).

The circumstances that arose require a different approach to performing everyday business tasks, adding new work tasks, and often required additional education of employees. On the other hand, a large number of employees in tourism and hospitality lost their jobs soon after the start of the pandemic. Diseases and injuries resulting from inadequate employee safety lead to increases absenteeism of

workers, and employees who are more seriously injured employers are obliged to pay them monetary compensation. All this increases costs and negatively affects company reputation. „Employees who were affected by the reduction of the labor force with the beginning of the world economic crisis became disappointed and excluded. This particularly affects the generation of young people who do not see enough chances to find jobs and develop a planned career path, further blocked by the elderly who can no longer afford the planned retirement” (Draskovic & Dzunic, 2020, 445). According to reports presented by the WTTC, 62 million jobs in the tourism sector were lost in 2020 (WTTC, 2020). Those employees who are not largely involved in day-to-day business activities are not even productive enough, do not contribute to the satisfaction of service users, and therefore generate a higher level of costs for employers.

HRM can rely on one of the following 4 strategies: repurposing, engagement, learning and lay-offs (Homkes, 2020). In order to avoid the most undesirable scenario, dismissal, it is possible to consider jobs that are not currently necessary and transfer employees from that sector to other work tasks. In some European countries, not only have employees been redirected, but entire organizations have expanded their business to adapt to the new circumstances. For example, the French perfume manufacturer LVMH has also started producing hand sanitizers. This help them to continue their business, but also to keep the same number of employees. Engagement in situation like this one can assume that HR department should communicate with all employees in order to acquire information from them about their mindset about current situation, their fears, personal problems which affect their dedication to job. Learning may not seem like a primary activity in the current situation, but the winners will be those that extend the learning curve this year (Homkes, 2020). All employees who are not engaged in key business activities can engage in learning by improving their knowledge about the business tasks of employees from other sectors or by considering the best ways to improve their performance once the situation is fully back to normal. The last, most unpopular strategy in human resource management in these times of crisis is to lay off a certain number of employees. Before that, business performance indicators should be carefully assessed and the need to reduce the number of employees determined. Employer must ensure that the remaining employees are not overburdened or additionally exposed to health risks. First options for lay off should be contract workers or agencies, employees nearing retirement, or those who may be more ready to take an early exit.

Ensuring the physical safety of employees is also in the interest of employers, so that employees are able to achieve their maximum performance at work. In this regard, managers who manage human resources must take into account the physical and mental health of employees. During the crisis period caused by the COVID-19

pandemic, the need to observe and improve both of these aspects of employees health came to the fore. In Republic of Serbia, there is a law which regulates area of employee health and safety.

Given the nature of the work, ie the high level of exposure of employees in tourism and hospitality, the WHO has made certain recommendations for those employed in these sectors. This recommendations include the following:

- Wash all parts of hands frequently;
- Cover a cough or sneeze with elbow;
- Maintaining distance from other staff and guests;
- Staying behind plexiglass;
- Teleworking when it is possible (WHO, 2020).

Even though pandemic incidences can't be anticipated, after SARS and H1N1 epidemics, same as epidemics of Ebola and Zika viruses, it is necessary to include policies and procedures for the possible epidemics and pandemics response into risk management and human resources management strategies (Caligiuri, De Cieri, Minbaeva, Verbeke & Zimmermann, 2020, 710).

Currently, many front-line employees face an extreme level of work-related stress and anxiety due to COVID-19 (Sung-Eun, Changyeon, Choong-Ki & Seunghoon, 2021, 2). It is certain that the current pandemic has hit healthcare workers hardest, but workers in the tourism and hospitality sectors are also constantly at risk of infection. There is also stress caused by the fear of losing a job. These are some of the reasons that force human resource managers to include in their skills new ones, related to human resource management in conditions of increased stress.

In crisis situations such as this, the trust of employees in the organization can be of great importance. Organizational trust can be defined as expectations individuals have about networks of organizational relationships and behaviors (Shockley-Zalabak, Ellis & Winograd, 2000, 37). Within the tourism and hospitality context, there is a need for affiliated organizations to support their employees by providing tangible/intangible resources for front-line staff (Sung-Eun, Changyeon, Choong-Ki & Seunghoon, 2021, 3). Also, as found in research conducted by Sung-Eun, Changyeon, Choong-Ki and Seunghoon, stress negatively affects job satisfaction, trust in organizations, self-esteem and loyalty to the organization. Same authors also suggest providing support to employees, both instrumental and emotional, during and after pandemic. That should be the best practise especially for tourism, hospitality and travel industry. When it is about instrumental support, it refers to provision protective gear to employees – safety glasses, facial masks, hand sanitizers, latex gloves. Additional measures that can contribute to employee safety, but also affect their level of job satisfaction and loyalty to the organization can be acquired if employees are provided with free virus testing, extend break time or increase the

number of breaks during the working day, reduce the number of shifts during the week if it is possible, minimize frontline employee contact with guests or clients. When employees believe they are well treated and that their employer cares about their wellbeing, they tend to have a favorable attitude toward work and the company/organization (Cullen, Edwards, Casper & Gue, 2014, 272).

Hotel organizations treated their employees differently during the crisis, depending on their size and number of employees. The fact is that large hotel chains with more significant funding have withstood the crisis better than smaller hotels. Hilton has announced that it will team up with 30 leading companies to provide temporary jobs, in addition to the common practice of covering health benefits (Sogno, 2021). Accor decided not to pay dividends for 2020 and to cover health care costs for employees without medical insurance. Other large hotel chains such as Marriott, Hyatt, MGM have implemented a policy of downsizing. In addition, the CEOs of these hotels have made the seeds of wage cuts for the remaining employees.

The crisis is still ongoing, but articles on the impact of the pandemic on HRM can already be found. At the same time, a satisfactory number of papers have been published on the topic of human resources management in the field of tourism and hospitality. The reason for this can be found in the benefits of these sectors in the crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. In the future, it is desirable to examine the impact of the crisis on human resources in specific organizations, and to examine the effects of individual strategies. The HRM research in the post-COVID-19 era will be related to a strong connection to the external environment, international working, development of technology, development of traditional HR practices amid COVID-19 and sustainable HRM (Cooke, Dickmann & Parry, 2021, 2).

CONCLUSION

Human resource management is another function in an organization that aims to increase profits. However, such an observation of things can lead to employee dissatisfaction, disloyalty and incomplete exploitation of their performance. In order to avoid this, it is necessary to continuously examine their views on the activities undertaken by the organizations, especially in a situation like one that is currently in proces. Finally, whenever possible, it is desirable to implement proposals that come from the employees themselves. Although more than a year has passed since the outbreak of the pandemic, and vaccines have been launched in the meantime, it is still ongoing. Periodically it seemed to subside, but it is evident that it is still present and will be so for some time to come. In this sense, it is necessary to adopt new practices in case the situation recurs.

With the emergence of a pandemic spreading as quickly as this current one, tourism and hospitality have suffered a significant blow. Consequently, there has

been a global stalemate for almost a year. A large number of employees in these sectors lost their jobs, while the remaining employees had to adopt new models of behavior and acquire new knowledge. All of this was a challenge for HR managers as well. They had a difficult task ahead of them, which included acquiring new knowledge, primarily in the field of crisis management. An additional aggravating circumstance was that the health of the employees was endangered in this situation. HRM in that period required taking care of their physical and mental health, due to constant exposure to stress. In addition, the key activities for HR managers in this period were repurposing, engagement, learning and only if and when it is necessary dismissal. This situation will have consequences for employees, managers but also for the whole area of HRM in tourism and hospitality sector. It is inevitable that management in a pandemic period will get a whole chapter in crisis management plans.

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