

Managing Hotel Manpower amidst COVID-19 Pandemic: The Case Study of Upscale Hotels in Phuket

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The hotel industry is vulnerable to catastrophes. Phuket, for instance, was a victim of the COVID-19 health crisis. This disruption generated detrimental impacts on many businesses worldwide, and the unemployment rate skyrocketed. While a few researchers have investigated human resources management practices in hotels during the COVID-19 pandemic, none of these studies have addressed insightful management practices during the prolonged situation in Phuket specifically. This research aims to fill this gap by examining the human resources management practices implemented by Phuket's upscale hotels. Eighteen hotel executives managing sixteen upscale hotels were interviewed in person at their premises. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data. The findings reveal fourteen human resources management practices that were widely undertaken by hotel practitioners. This research contributes profound knowledge in managing hotel manpower across the three waves of the pandemic. It also confirms that the Phuket hotel industry lacks readiness to tackle health crises. Hotel practitioners can adopt human resources management strategies that best parallel their hotel characteristics to prevail over future health crises.

Keyword: Human resources management practices; Upscale hotels; COVID-19; Phuket

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Introduction

The COVID-19 health crisis has seriously disrupted several business sectors. State governments around the world responded differently to this catastrophe, implementing measures such as travel bans, lockdowns, and physical distancing. The hospitality and tourism industry has become a prominent victim. Phuket is a major source of tourism revenue for the country (Tourism Authority of Thailand, 2021). Tourism is an essential vein nourishing the provincial economy. The emergence of these phenomena caused Phuket's hospitality and tourism industry to become fragile. According to a COVID-19 socio-economic impact assessment report, there was a substantial loss of 38,175 million baht in the food and beverage sector and 49,436 million baht in the lodging sector (Phetvaroon et al., 2020). In addition, the Phuket workforce encountered wage reductions, particularly in tour operators (-58%) and accommodation businesses (-51%) (Phetvaroon et al., 2020). This ongoing catastrophic event has led hotel practitioners to respond to the circumstances with various practices. As a consequence, Phuket's unemployment rate dramatically surged from 1.45% in 2019 to 2.57% in 2020 and 11.02% in 2021 (Provincial Labor Office of Phuket, 2021).

Based on a review of the literature, few studies have focused on managing hotel employees during times of crisis (Henderson & Ng, 2004; Kim et al., 2005; Pavlatos et al., 2020; Lai & Wong, 2020; Yacoub & ElHajjar, 2020; Kaushal & Srivastava, 2021). Recent studies on hotels' COVID-19 crisis management focused on strategic management during the lockdown period. None of the existing studies investigated how hotel executives managed manpower for the entire duration of the event. Most studies were conducted after rather than during a crisis, such as the SARS health crisis in Hong Kong and China (Lee, 2009; Wan, 2013). Furthermore, no studies involved in-person (face-to-face) in-depth interviews throughout the outbreak, which resulted in a lack of strategically critical insights for the industry.

In light of the above, this paper attempts to fill these gaps by examining how four- and five-star hotel executives managed hotel staff during the ongoing spread of the virus in Phuket, formulating the research question: "What practices are undertaken in the human resources division?" Managing upscale hotels during the current COVID-19 health crisis challenged hotel executives' managerial experiences because there were abundant employees and ample facilities to look after. Therefore, detailed human resources practices are needed. The findings contribute profound knowledge that will benefit hotel practitioners in

responding to human resources management challenges during future health crises. Academic scholars can utilize this human resources strategic response blueprint as a reference.

Literature Review

Israeli & Reichel (2003) first examined the usage and importance of the crisis management practices framework, pointing out 21 crisis management practices for the Israeli hospitality industry, categorized into four themes: marketing, human resources, maintenance, and governmental assistance. Human resources practices are one of the crucial themes of crisis management. (Henderson & Ng, 2004) inspected how hotels in Singapore responded to Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) in 2003. Their studies on human resources practices indicated that Singaporean hotels kept permanent staff, reduced salaries, asked for unpaid leave, and provided training programs to the staff. (Kim et al., 2005) examined the consequences of the SARS crisis on six well-known five-star hotels in South Korea. The Korean hotels asked staff to take leave without pay instead of terminating employment, reduced the number of temporary staff, but did not lay off permanent staff. They also provided training and education programs regarding health awareness and established effective communication channels among associates.

In times of the COVID-19 crisis, given the growing number of literature, (Lai & Wong, 2020) investigated crisis management practices in the hotel industry in Macau, China. Their studies displayed seven human resources practices, but the most effective actions during the pandemic stage in Macau were reducing working days and office hours, and encouraging staff to use unpaid vacation. Another piece of literature on COVID-19 crisis management was conducted in Greek hotels. (Pavlatos et al., 2020) stated that the fundamental focus of human resources practices is reducing labor costs, as 50% of hotel operating costs are labor costs (Mandelbaum, 2017). Seven human resources practices were discovered, with the two most important in Greece being replacing highly-paid employees with low-paid ones and freezing pay rates (Pavlatos et al., 2020).

Recent studies on COVID-19 have been conducted in other developed countries in Europe, such as Italy and Spain. For example, (Hidalgo et al., 2022) explored management strategies that Spain's hotel managers pursued to overcome the COVID-19 crisis. Their findings indicated that labor force measures were associated with hotel labor cost reduction, including reducing the labor force, decreasing wages, providing some training programs, and outsourcing. Another research study about the impact of COVID-19 on luxury accommodation in

Italy by (Campo et al., 2024) addressed how hotel managers responded to their hotel employees. The findings pointed out that employees could either choose to work or stay at home during the lockdown. Simultaneously, an open communication channel was created to keep the hotel staff updated on the unprecedented situation. Besides, the effectiveness of teamwork declined during hotel closure, while smart working was considered the most effective way for all organizational levels. Three working groups were set up for the reopening phase. One of the human resources strategies was providing staff training activities to build trust and a sense of belonging.

Methodology

In accordance with the research aim, this study applied a qualitative research technique using descriptive phenomenology to gain insightful human resources practices. Target informants were hotel executives working at operating upscale hotels in Phuket during the outbreak. As a matter of fact, general managers can provide in-depth management strategies for hotels, as their major responsibilities include looking after guests, employees, and facility maintenance, controlling operations, and maximizing hotel profitability (Chon & Maier, 2021). For this reason, the hotels' general managers were chosen for interviews, and the informants' profiles are presented in Table 1.

However, the ongoing pandemic challenged the feasibility of conducting in-person, in-depth interviews at the properties. Thus, the "Snowball technique" was applied to reach informants with similar experiences, characteristics, and attitudes (Schindler, 2021). To elaborate on how this technique works: after the researcher completed an in-person interview with the first hotel, the informant was then asked to refer the researcher to the next upscale hotel. Prior to the interview day, the research topic, objectives, and questions were sent to the general managers via email in advance. The three general managers of the upscale hotels validated the research questions. A semi-structured interview is a combination of closed- and open-ended questions, usually followed by "why" or "how" questions (Adams, 2015). Therefore, the informants were encouraged to freely talk and share their experiences in tackling the COVID-19 situation without disruption.

Table 1 The informants' profiles

Informant	Hotel Code	Gender (M/F)	Nationality	Age	Total Experiences in Hotel	Experiences in Current Hotel
I1	U1	M	Thai	49	22	3
I2	U2	M	Thai	43	19	15
I3	U3	M	Non-Thai	46	25	3
I4		M	Non-Thai	57	33	7.2
I5	U4	M	Thai	41	21	2
I6	U5	M	Non-Thai	42	27	3
I7	U6	M	Non-Thai	54	30	7
I8	U7	M	Non-Thai	54	32	7
	U8					
I9	U9	M	Non-Thai	47	31	3
I10	U10	M	Non-Thai	49	33	4
I11		F	Thai	43	10	4
I12	U11	M	Non-Thai	53	35	5
I13	U12	F	Thai	57	34	7
I14	U13	M	Thai	57	34	30
I15		M	Thai	44	22	2.5
I16	U14	F	Thai	46	19	3
I17	U15	M	Non-Thai	44	22	8
I18	U16	M	Non-Thai	52	26	7

The term “Data Saturation” was used to indicate when the researcher should stop interviewing. This concept occurs when no new data, new themes, or new coding are found (Guest et al., 2006). In this study, the interviews were stopped when no new practices were being heard, or the information obtained was similar to that from other hotels. Data was collected from 16 upscale hotels during the ongoing pandemic in Phuket between March 2021 and April 2022. Each session lasted 30-45 minutes (including inspections) at the hotels.

Both the researcher and informants were attentive to safety and hygiene matters by complying with new normal practices, particularly washing hands upon entering the hotels, maintaining physical distancing, and wearing a face mask for the entire session.

The conversations were recorded on audio recorders with a passcode lock and subsequently verbatim transcribed. The transcriptions were read, and some irrelevant data and themes were removed. Prior to analyzing the data, a pre-coding scheme of human resources was developed from two pertinent studies about crisis management practices during the COVID-19 pandemic: one in Greek hotels (Pavlatos et al., 2020) and another on epidemic crisis management practices for the hotel industry in Macau, China (Lai & Wong, 2020). Utilizing a thematic analysis approach provides a high tendency of validity due to its flexibility, transparency, and accessibility (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The first revision of hotel human resources management practices from the literature yielded eight major practices, which are displayed in Table 2.

Table 2 Revised coding from Hotel Crisis Management Practices in Greece and Macau, China

Theme	Practice	Code
Human Resources	Reducing the labor force by laying off temporary employees	HR1
	Reducing the labor force by unpaid vacation	HR2
	Reducing the number of office hours or working days	HR3
	Freezing or reducing pay rates	HR4
	Replacing high-tenure employees with new employees	HR5
	Hire internship students instead of permanent employees	HR6
	Provide voluntary early retirement or resignation plans	HR7
	Cut some benefits such as staff party, pick-up service	HR8

New findings of human resources practices from the interviews were merged with the first revised version above. Unrelated practices from previous studies were removed; only practices relevant to Phuket hotels' context were maintained. Final codes of human resources practices were generated as shown in Table 3. There were 14 finalized management practices, which the researcher manually analyzed for every upscale hotel in Phuket without bias.

Table 3 Finalized 14 human resources management practices of Phuket upscale hotels

Code	Management Practice
MP1	Retrench staff
MP2	Use unpaid vacation
MP3	Outsource staff or internship students
MP4	Reduce working hours/days
MP5	Freeze or reduce pay rates
MP6	Reduce duplicate positions
MP7	Offer an early retirement package
MP8	Implement job rotation
MP9	Perform multi-tasking
MP10	Adjust staff's benefits
MP11	Permit staff to wear casual
MP12	Provide rescue bags to staff families
MP13	Support staff to be compensated by the Social Security Office
MP14	Provide some training programs

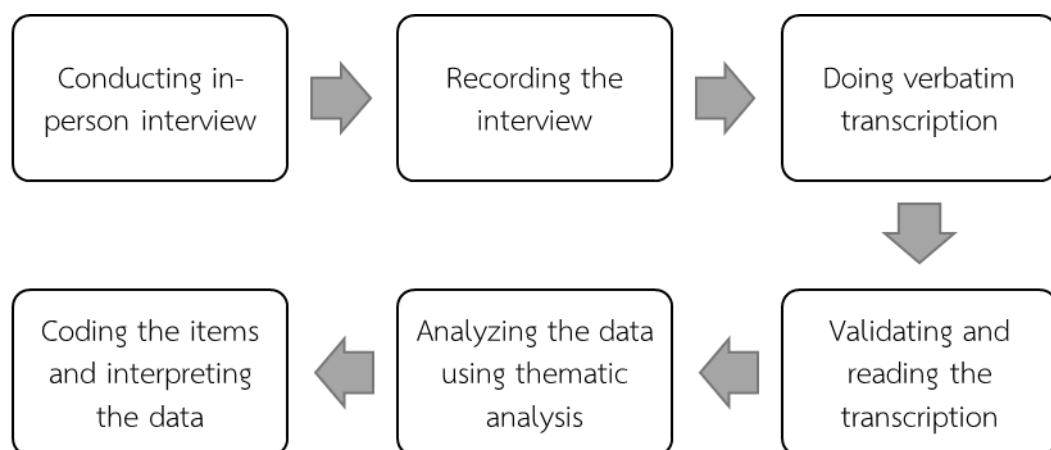


Figure 1 Interview Process

Results

The hit of COVID-19 caused hotel practitioners to revamp their management strategies, especially managing hotel staff. At the early stage of the outbreak, the hotel staff were asked to take their holidays and use unpaid vacation (MP2).

"We asked the staff to take unpaid leave to reduce the cashflow impacted to the owner" – U9

Travel bans and lockdowns caused the hotel staff's conditions to be worse, particularly when the hotels applied another set of strategies. The sub-district lockdown became a significant obstacle for staff coming to work. Some hotels arranged for teams to stay inside the properties. All participating hotels allowed the staff to wear casual instead of uniforms (MP11). At the same time, 100% of the participating hotels reduced staff's working hours/days (MP4) and froze or reduced pay rates (MP5). Besides that, 75% of the participants adjusted their staff's benefits (MP10), for instance reducing the variety of staff's meals at the canteen, cutting staff pick-up service and laundry service. More than 80% of the participants implemented job rotation (MP8) and realized that multi-tasking skills (MP9) were considered valuable assets, and highly required by the hotel practitioner. However, only 3 participating hotels outsourced staff, and some internship students (MP3) to assist hotel operations in times of crisis.

Since this health crisis seemed to be prolonged, 62.5% of participating hotels eventually retrenched their staff (MP1). The study shows that U10 reduced a large number of staff by 420 while before Covid-19 they were hiring 700 staff. U7 retrenched the least staff by 70 from 120 before Covid-19. The staff who were on probation and had working experience of less than one year would be an initial group of staff retrenchment. Nevertheless, four independent upscale hotels (U1, U2, U4, U5) and two upscale chain hotels (U12 and U15) did not retrench their staff, but the staff voluntarily quit their jobs and moved back to their hometowns.

"People living locally in Phuket, or have a house here. It was easier for them to come to work, but somebody who came from a different area, they mostly had made the decision to go back depending on their situations as well" – U5

Despite the staff retrenchment measure, the hotel still supported their staff to be compensated by the Social Security Office (MP13). Compellingly, reducing duplicate positions (MP6)

and offering an early retirement package (MP7) were only implemented by the upscale chain hotels that hired hundreds of hotel staff before the crisis. Providing rescue bags (MP12) to the hotel staff families was not widely executed by the hotel practitioners, there were only two independent upscale hotels (U2 and U5) implemented. During the ongoing outbreak, existing hotel staff received training opportunities in various programs (MP14) to excel their skills.

"We taught 2 things to the staff how to paint and how to grow vegetables. So, we would like them to use the time when there were no guests to learn a new skill" – U5

"Keep the people motivated, keep the people engaged, engagement is a very important aspect of our business" – U15

"With less people, we expect everybody to do more. So, we have done a lot of cross-training. So, we are adjusting a little bit of positions to be allowing for flexibility" – U16

Table 4 Hotel Characteristics and Human Resources Management Practices

Hotel Code	Hotel Type	No. of Rooms /Villas	Number of Staff		Reduced by	Staff Reduction (in %)	Human Resources Management Practices													
			Before	During			MP 1	MP 2	MP 3	MP 4	MP 5	MP 6	MP 7	MP 8	MP 9	MP 10	MP 11	MP 12	MP 13	MP 14
U1	5* Independent Hotel	95 pool villas	240	170	70	29.2		x	x	x	x					x	x		x	x
U2	5* Independent Hotel	92 pool villas	180	100	80	44.4		x		x	x			x	x	x	x	x	x	x
U3	5* Independent Hotel	200 rooms and villas	380	290	90	23.7	x	x		x	x			x	x	x	x		x	x
U4	5* Independent Boutique Hotel	35 rooms	28	18	10	35.7		x		x	x				x	x	x		x	x
U5	5* Independent Hotel	38 villas	180	120	60	33.3		x		x	x			x	x	x	x	x	x	x

Hotel Code	Hotel Type	No. of Rooms /Villas	Number of Staff		Reduced by	Staff Reduction (in %)	Human Resources Management Practices													
			Before	During			MP 1	MP 2	MP 3	MP 4	MP 5	MP 6	MP 7	MP 8	MP 9	MP 10	MP 11	MP 12	MP 13	MP 14
U6	5* Independent Hotel	120 rooms	240	130	110	45.8	x	x	x	x	x			x		x	x		x	x
U7	5* Independent Hotel	124 rooms	120	50	70	58.3	x	x		x	x			x	x	x	x		x	x
U8	4* Independent Hotel	330 rooms	160	50	110	68.8	x	x		x	x			x	x	x	x		x	x
U9	5* Chain Hotel	152 villas	280	90	190	67.9	x	x		x	x				x	x	x		x	x
U10	5* Chain Hotel	371 rooms	700	280	420	60.0	x	x		x	x			x	x		x		x	x
U11	5* Chain Hotel	470 rooms	800	430	370	46.3	x	x		x	x	x	x	x	x		x		x	x
U12	5* Chain Hotel	253 rooms	290	188	102	35.2		x		x	x		x	x	x		x			x
U13	4.5* Chain Hotel	398 rooms	498	180	318	63.9	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x		x	x

Hotel Code	Hotel Type	No. of Rooms /Villas	Number of Staff		Reduced by	Staff Reduction (in %)	Human Resources Management Practices													
			Before	Before			MP 1	MP 2	MP 3	MP 4	MP 5	MP 6	MP 7	MP 8	MP 9	MP 10	MP 11	MP 12	MP 13	MP 14
U14	5* Chain Hotel	221 rooms and villas	325	160	165	50.8	x	x		x	x	x		x	x	x	x		x	x
U15	5* Chain Hotel	314 rooms and villas	300	180	120	40.0		x		x	x			x	x	x	x			x
U16	5* Chain Hotel	106 keys	298	156	142	47.7	x	x		x	x			x	x		x			x

*U means Upscale hotel

*MP means Management Practice

MP1: Retrench staff

MP2: Use unpaid vacation

MP3: Outsource staff or internship students

MP4: Reduce working hours/days

MP5: Freeze or reduce pay rates

MP6: Reduce duplicate positions

MP7: Offer an early retirement package

MP8: Implement job rotation

MP9: Perform multi-tasking

MP10: Adjust staff's benefits

MP11: Permit staff to wear casual

MP12: Provide rescue bags to staff families

MP13: Support staff to be compensated by the Social Security Office

MP14: Provide some training programs

Discussion and Conclusion

The focal point of this research is to investigate how hotel executives of Phuket's upscale hotels managed their hotel manpower during the COVID-19 pandemic. This empirical study contributes a vital body of knowledge benefiting both academia and the hotel industry. Fourteen detailed human resources management practices were discovered. The interviews indicate that all upscale hotels attempted to reduce expenses by diminishing the number of working hours/days and asking staff to use unpaid vacations. This aligns with the research conducted by Lai & Wong (2020), which found that the two effective practices to reduce operating costs during the crisis were reducing the number of office hours or working days and reducing the labor force through unpaid vacation.

Hotel executives implemented numerous management practices to handle the ongoing outbreak in Phuket, including retrenching staff, reducing payroll, adjusting staff benefits, providing online and offline training programs, and requiring staff to perform multi-tasking (Henderson & Ng, 2004; Kim et al., 2005; Pavlatos et al., 2020; Lai & Wong, 2020; Yacoub & ElHajjar, 2020). However, offering an early retirement package or mutual separation, and reducing duplicate positions were only implemented in upscale chain hotels with several years of hotel operations and many staff. Eventually, many staff voluntarily resigned due to insufficient incomes and the high cost of living in Phuket. By contrast, Yacoub and ElHajjar (2021) stated that laying off staff was considered a brutal reaction made by hotel managers. Some terminated staff were still in contact and would be recalled when the hotels reopened. Therefore, Phuket hotel executives resiliently responded to the ongoing crisis with various human resources management practices to retain staff engagement and ensure the survival of their hotel businesses.

Theoretical Implications

While research on hotels' health crisis management has grown over time (Henderson & Ng, 2004; Kim et al., 2005; Lai & Wong, 2020; Pavlatos et al., 2020; Yacoub & ElHajjar, 2021; Le & Phi, 2021), an initial study on crisis management practices was conducted by Israeli and Reichel (2003) in Israel's hotel industry. They identified four categories: marketing, maintenance, human resources, and government assistance. Later, 5 categories and 31 practices of Greek hotels' pandemic crisis management were explored, including operations, maintenance, human resources, marketing, and government (Pavlatos et al., 2020). Lai & Wong (2020)

proposed 31 practices in 5 categories: marketing, maintenance, epidemic prevention, human resources, and governmental support.

In the Phuket context, fourteen insightful human resources management practices were established. Numerous management practices were addressed due to the duration of the pandemic and hotel characteristics. The Phuket hotel sector adjusted to survival mode by applying cost-cutting strategies on its hotel manpower (Israeli, 2007; Burhan et al., 2021). However, one of the crucial categories in crisis management practices is government (Israeli & Reichel, 2003). All hotel practitioners confirm that the Phuket hotel industry received limited support from the government. This implies that the government's rescue package differs between developed and developing countries. Thus, to diminish substantial loss and mitigate hotel staff difficulties, Phuket hotel executives should not solely rely on government support.

Practical Implications

Due to the different levels of hotel readiness in tackling crises, it is mandatory for hotel executives to be resilient. Detrimental damage will be minimized when hotel practitioners are proactive. In addition, hotel managerial positions must possess updated contingency plans or human resources crisis management plans. The findings demonstrate that a saving strategy is the most effective response, particularly staff retrenchment, even if it is considered an unsustainable human resources management practice. Compellingly, other cost-cutting practices that benefit hotel executives in managing manpower include reducing the number of staff, asking staff to use unpaid vacation, reducing working hours/days as well as their pay rates, allowing staff to wear casual clothes while the hotels were under lockdown, implementing job rotation by encouraging hotel staff to perform multitasking, and adjusting staff's benefits, especially the variety of staff meals, pick-up service, and laundry service. Albeit providing training programs during a crisis has some costs, it is worth taking this time to upskill and reskill their current staff. From the findings, outstanding examples of cross-training activities are teaching hotel staff how to grow organic vegetables inside the hotel for kitchen use and how to paint and refurbish the hotel when it is under closure. However, the hotel industry may lack skillful or talented staff after recovery. Managing sufficient and insufficient staff during a catastrophe presents a different

challenge for executives. The pandemic challenges how executives manage limited staff to work productively without jeopardizing guests' experiences. Thus, hotel practitioners should invest in cross-training programs for staff, and setting clear working schedules would build staff confidence to get used to multiple tasks. Timing is another crucial key when making managerial decisions, so executives should prioritize when and what practices should be implemented first. Individual upscale hotels may perform different management strategies at various points in time from others. Most importantly, hotel practitioners should maintain close and transparent communication among stakeholders.

Limitations and Future Research

This research comes with limitations. The most challenging part was conducting face-to-face interviews with hotel executives during the spread of the virus. The most difficult aspect of this research was the duration of data collection. Reaching operating upscale hotels was a significant obstacle. It took fourteen months to interview sixteen upscale hotels around Phuket Island. The lengthy data collection resulted in an incomplete picture of human resources management practices, as individual participants were interviewed at different stages of the pandemic, leading to some missing management practices.

This research is one of the first academic attempts to examine the management practices of hotel staff in Phuket during the pandemic. Future research could investigate the management practices of other departments in upscale hotels, such as operations, maintenance, marketing, and government support. Comparing comprehensive management practices between independent and international chain hotels would provide insightful contributions to benefit academia and the hospitality industry. Additionally, examining airlines' human resources management practices is another notable topic for future research.

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