

Normative requirements and practical-applied skills of personnel employed in the hotel industry - problems and challenges

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Abstract. The aim of this article is to explore the problems facing the hotel industry caused by the lack of staff. On this basis, specific proposals have been made to overcome the shortage of staff resources by making recommendations to the management related to the optimization of personnel policy and the stimulation of staff. The scope of the study is limited to the problems arising in the hotel industry in Bulgaria, arising due to the lack of staff, including managerial positions. The latter is also a so-shaped limitation of the study, although similar problems exist both in countries of the European and in countries of the extra-European Union. The survey is carried out on the basis of an analysis of statistical data on the number of accommodation establishments, the number of overnight stays, the revenues from nights spent in Bulgaria, the tourism expenditures of Russia and Ukraine, etc. It is argued that increasing the knowledge and skills of employees is a serious incentive to keep the last to work in tourism. The design of the study and the methods used are clear and understandable to the reader. The results of the research, after some adaptation, can find immediate application in the practice of any tourist enterprise.

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1. Introduction

Hospitality skills are vital for the work in the industry. They are all the skills, knowledge and behaviors that enable employees in the sector to create a positive relationship between the company they work for and the people they service. Possessing good skills includes the ability for staff to be always friendly and professional with customers, to anticipate and respond to customer needs, and to be organized so that hotel operations run smoothly. Skills in the field are essential for any role in the service sector, including working in hotels, restaurants, spas, guest services and reception. Although there are many roles in the hospitality industry, most of them require many of the same basic skills, such as communication and teamwork.

The challenges in hospitality have always been a balancing act of taking care of employees and customers. However, the global Coronavirus pandemic adds another layer of complexity to an already nuanced sector. The hospitality industry may not be unique in its reliance on customer service, but few other industries in the modern economy are so closely tied to it. Most organizations in this dynamic and competitive space depend on their ability to effectively cater to the ever-changing demands of a fluctuating customer base. Some of the issues that managers in the hospitality industry deal with are related to cross-cultural management, people empowerment and people assurance, all of which are very important to ensure that employees perform their duties and provide quality service to the customers.

This study examines some of the most important challenges facing the hospitality industry, including the current business environment and the issues of human resources. It goes without saying that one of the best ways to overcome the problems is to invest in human resources. Finding qualified staff who can manage a hotel is the surest path to guest satisfaction and guest retention. At the same time, this is one of the most important challenges for hotels, as employees are the face of the business. They take care of all activities including customer service, housekeeping, administration and payment processing. Industry can overcome this challenge through several activities outlined in the article.

The hotel industry is one of the fastest developing industries in the world. It is an inseparable and irreplaceable part from the tourist sector. According to the International Monetary Fund (IMF, 2020) travel and tourism constitute 10 percent from the world's gross domestic product and more than 320 million work places in the world. This report debates the basic normative requirements and practical-applied skills of personnel, employed in hotel business, as well as the problems and challenges, which they face.

In the years hotel industry demonstrates weak indicators of slowing down even during economic recessions (IMF, 2020). Independently of that, the COVID-19 pandemic led to global challenges, economic and health crises and created negative impact on global industries, including tourism and travel. Russia's military offensive in Ukraine brings a negative risk for international tourism. Additionally, it affects the already high prices of petrol and transport costs, increases the instability and disturbs travel in Europe. According to WTO data (2020), the mostly affected destinations to this moment, except Russia and Ukraine, are the Republic of Moldova with 69% decrease of flights from 24 February (compared to the levels from 2019), Slovenia (-42%), Latvia (-38%) and Finland (-36%) according to Euro control data. Russian reservations for outgoing flights also decreased at the end of February and the beginning of March, but they recovered since then, according to data of Forward keys.

Despite the conflict, a growth in the European air traffic can be seen from the middle of March till the beginning of May in year 2022. The airplane reservations for Intereuropean travels and for flights from the USA to Europe are also increasing. The alleviation of travel limitations, connected with Covid-19, contributes to the normalization of travels, but the conflict continues to represent a serious threat for the recovery of the tourist industry and the world economics. A possible loss of 14 billion USD in the tourist sector is foreseen and hindrance of the recovery of trust in global travel as a result from the military actions. As outgoing markets Russia and Ukraine constitute a total of 3% from the global expenses for international tourism as of year 2020. In 2019 the Russian expenditures for travelling abroad equal 36 billion USD, and the Ukrainian ones 8,5 billion USD. In the year 2020 these values have decreased to 9,1 billion USD and 4,7 billion USD respectively.

As tourist destinations Russia and Ukraine in 2021 constitute 4% from the international tourists' arrivals in Europe, but 1% only from the international tourism revenues in Europe. Still, the importance of the two markets is essential for the neighboring countries, and also for the European destinations.

Although the hotel and tourist industry as a sector exhibits recovery trends after the worst year 2020, there are challenges that still have to be examined. They have been existing for the latest several years and are going to need strategic solutions. The present elaboration examines the main problems of hotel industry in the year 2022 and in the future.

In view of the complex economic situation, the Bulgarian touristic sector is undergoing changes and is facing new challenges. According to data of the National Statistical Institute, the places of accommodation in 2021 are 3,335, and the number of accommodated persons is 5,647,634.

Although there is no available statistic, a shortage of personnel is continuously observed in the sector. Apart from the lack is filled with staff from abroad - mainly Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, Russia, etc. In view of the present situation, the current summer season is subject to changes. The shortage of employees is deepening distinctively in 2022 as well, this problem remains a main challenge in the tourist sector and hotel business.

RUSSIA AND UKRAINE'S INTERNATIONAL TOURISM SPENDING (% OF WORLD TOTAL)

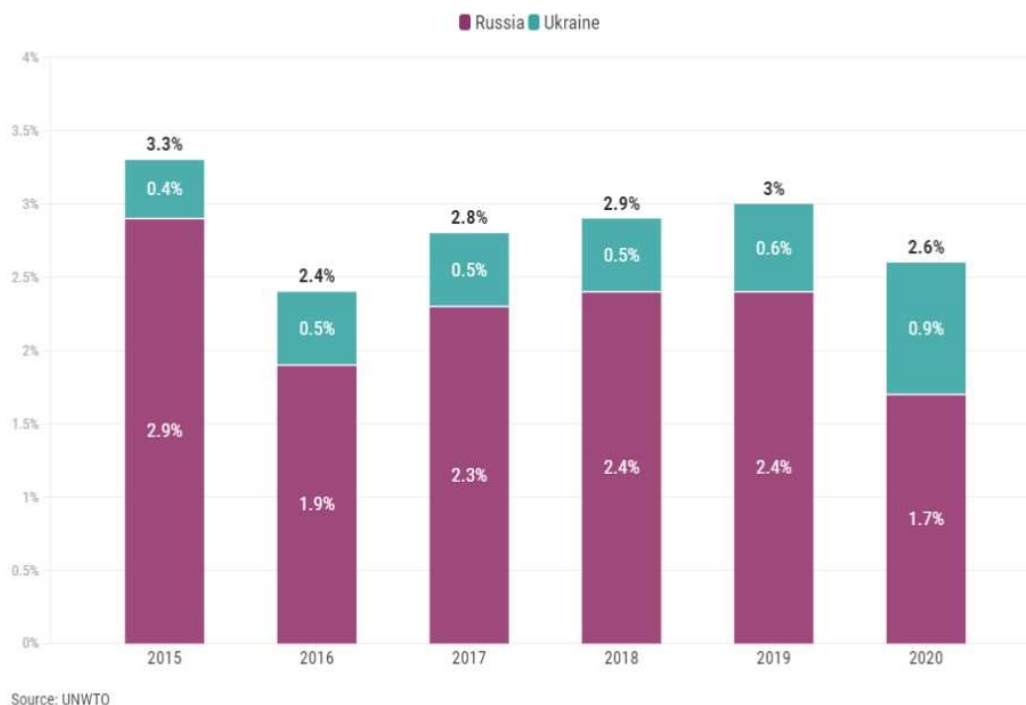


Figure 1. The expenses of Russia and Ukraine for international tourism (% from the total in the world)
Source: WTO, impact of the Russian offensive in Ukraine on international tourism, onto tourism market intelligence and competitiveness, 2022

- **Normative requirements for the personnel, employed in the hotel industry**

Due to the specifics of the activity and the nature of the work in field of tourism, there exist several normative requirements regarding the employees. According to the Regulation for the requirements to the categorized places of accommodation and places of public eating and entertainment, about the order for determining of the category, as well as about the conditions and order for registration of rooms for guests and apartments (2020), the professional and language qualification of the personnel is a norm for the determining of the category of the tourist beds. The legislator has offered the various types and categories of places of accommodation and public places of eating and entertainment and requirements for their interior design, the technological equipment and finally staffing, which aims to guarantee the comfort and security of visitors.

All the activities in the hotel industry depend on the professional knowledge and skills of the servicing personnel. Unfortunately, often in the practice, the individual level of preparation of each employee cannot be defined, and the Regulation for the categorization of tourist objects makes a provision the general manager to declare the professional and language qualification of the personnel in the object, for the observing of the norm for professional and language qualification. The requirements towards the employees become bigger, the higher the category of the place of accommodation is. The lowest category obliges the general managers to have a minimum of secondary professional education, or education and a professional qualification, or secondary education and a 3-year working experience in the system of tourism and the command of one foreign language. This to a great extent aims to guarantee a competent management of the tourist objects. For one of the basic job positions in hotel industry, namely that of an administrator-receptionist, the requirements are like the ones for the general manager. This is determined by the essence of the work, which relates to the quality servicing of the guests, the performance of the financial operations and other administrative-accommodation activities. For the chambermaid personnel a minimum of primary education is compulsory since this department in a hotel is low qualified. This requirement relates to the lack of personnel at a national level. The high categories (4 and 5 stars) are characterized with high demands regarding the personnel. A secondary education at least is necessary and a professional qualification, and higher education is required for the employees at managerial positions. In this

regard it is recommended the hoteliers to hire personnel with ready professional skills and a higher educational degree.

To summarize, the normative requirements for a professional and language qualification include the necessary criteria, which to guarantee the professional and language qualification and preparation of the personnel for the respective category. This on its part provides quality servicing of the customers and a professional management of the tourist objects from all types and categories. The Categorization regulation is a fundamental source and reference point for the definition of the categories of the touristic objects and the quality management in hotel business. Its examination results in multiple conclusions:

- It aims to differentiate all material and non-material details in the hotel industry supply. Thus it can provide high quality and standard in the separate types and categories of places of accommodation.
- The norms encompass the basic principles and components of supply for the different types of objects (construction, furnishing and equipment, servicing, offered services and requirements towards the personnel).
- The service quality is secured by the high requirements regarding the servicing, the offered services, the professional and language qualification of the personnel in the tourist objects.
- The normative framework is not adaptive and does not allow deviations from the standard. There are not any deviation percentages available. For example, in the practice it is not possible all the premises in one hotel to correspond to the sizes, defined as minimal and obligatory, which leads to subjectivism and makes the assessment invalid to a certain extent.

2. Applied skills of personnel employed in hotel industry

The skills of persons, employed in the hotel industry, are all those skills, knowledge and behaviour, which allow employees in the sector to create a positive connection between the company for which they work, and the people, whom they service. The possession of good skills encompasses the capability the personnel to be friendly and professional to the customers at any time, to anticipate and respond to the customers' needs and to be organized so, that the activities in the hotel run smoothly. The capabilities in the sphere are of substantial importance for each role in the sphere of services, including employment at hotels, restaurants, spa centers, departments for servicing of guests and receptions. Although there are many types of job positions in the hotel industry, most of them demand many of the same fundamental skills as communication and teamwork.

The work in the hotel industry demands a broad diapason of skills, most of which develop in the course of the activity itself. They could include technical skills as well, such as for example the usage of a definite computer program or an application for processing of reservations for a hotel or a restaurant. We hereby examine twelve from the most important skills for personnel in hotel industry.

- **Professionalism**

The demonstration of professionalism through the respect of the guests' and colleagues' boundaries and the keeping of a relevant emotional distance from them is an important skill for anyone, who works in hotel business. It requires the learning of what is suitable for the development of hospitable environment. Professionalism includes a constant reaching of high standards and foremost competence, knowledge, conscientiousness, respectability, respect, appropriate behavior and confidence.

- **Communication**

The clear and professional communication is one of the most important parts of the work in the hotel industry. It includes not only communication with the guests, but also with other staff members and other departments in the object, so that nothing is missed. Communication skills also include listening and understanding of the body language. With these skills the staff members can quickly understand what the customer needs, often before they have demanded a concrete thing.

- **Attention to detail**

In the industry context this means the noticing of all small details, which can influence the guest's satisfaction. This can include activities such as when a given surface needs cleaning, whether a customer is still waiting for an order, to the complete satisfaction of the consumer and their total experience during their stay. The highly qualified personnel members differ from the rest, since they anticipate all details of the customer's visit and make everything possible to improve their experience.

- **Multitasking**

It is necessary for the personnel to be able to monitor big groups of customers simultaneously, as they remember the individual necessities of every customer. They treat every visitor as their first priority. These skills are mostly developed through practice, and the improvement of efficiency could be attained for example with the preparation of control lists or visualization of the order, in which the separate tasks will be done.

- **Resolving of problems**

Often the personnel work can include identifying problems, which the guests have, and the development of methods for their resolving. This minimizes the negative effects on their overall experience. It could also include the follow-up of the customers later, to guarantee the visitors' satisfaction and the positive assessment of the personnel and the hotel.

- **Patience**

This is a key skill for every expert in customer servicing. The problem resolving is a big part from each role in hotel industry.

- **Positive attitude**

The capability to stay positive, even in difficult situations, is an important skill for the professionals in hotel business. Customers often expect to be treated kindly and with respect all the time and the positive attitude could help this to be achieved. The positive attitude could influence the other team members as well and make the work place a more pleasant environment.

- **Initiative**

The work in the hotel industry often includes the reliance on one's own knowledge and instincts, in different situations. Qualified employees in the hotel business are in the position to foresee what could be needed to be done later. This quality could impress customers and facilitate the work with other people.

- **Adaptation**

In the hotel industry, often situations appear with managing changes in the last moment or the availability of unexpected circumstances. This could include situations as a change of the shifts, customers asking questions, to which the concrete employee does not know the answer. These skills are often accumulated in the course of time and experience.

- **Teamwork**

These skills assist the efficient cooperation between the colleagues, as well as the increase of the customers' satisfaction. They allow the personnel to achieve more together, than they separately could, since each of them has different skills and capabilities. Besides, it gives the opportunity for the sharing of responsibilities, encouraging and support of the team and improvement of the communication skills.

- **Emotional intelligence**

The use of empathy and compassion for the understanding of the feelings of other people is an important skill of the hotel industry personnel. It is often possible to work with difficult customers and it is important to understand the main problem, which they face, for it to be resolved in the most appropriate way. Compassion allows the adaptation of behavior and actions to the separate customer.

- **Cultural conscience**

The work in hotel industry relates to a continuous and daily current of people. They could be of a different age, different origin and possess their own culture, beliefs, values, personalities and expectations. The regarding of these differences secures the comfort and good experience of the customers as well as the team.

The challenges in hotel industry have always been an activity of balancing the care for employees and customers. The global Corona virus pandemic however adds another layer of complexity to an already nuanced sector. The hotel industry might not be unique in its dependence on customer servicing, but a few other sectors in modern economics are so closely connected with it. Most organizations in the dynamic and competitive space depend on their ability to effectively take care of the continuously changing requirements of dynamic customers' purposefulness.

Some of the problems, with which general managers in the hotel sector deal, are connected with intercultural management, the empowerment of people and the provision of people, as all of this is very important in order to guarantee, that employees fulfill their duties and provide quality service to the customers.

Even in the complex economic and geopolitical situation, one of the most serious problems, which hotel industry continues to face is the lack of personnel. The circumstances are similar in the city places of accommodation, as well as the vacation ones. But still, this problem is not characteristic of Bulgaria only. For example, research of eHotelier (2018), shows, that in hotel business and education in field of tourism in the United Kingdom, they suffer from a multitude of political, economic and financial impacts, which have an adverse effect on personnel recruiting. This is not only a permanent problem with recruiting of personnel, but there are additional difficulties with the enrollment of students in courses and training in hotel industry at colleges and higher education institutions. What is also surprising, is that for an industry in which 1 of every 13 people works in Great Britain, the traineeships in hotel industry represent just less than 2% from the total number, and 98 % from the total number start working in other industries (Figure 2), as the starting personnel in accounting are more than the ones in hotel business (Figure 3).

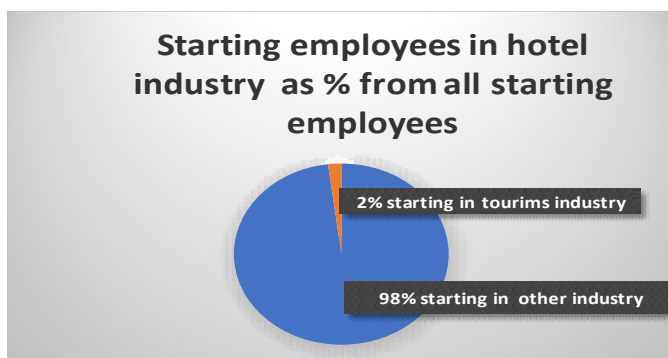


Figure 2 Starting employees in hotel business as % from all starting employees in Great Britain /
Source: eHotelier, UK hospitality education – in decline, 2018

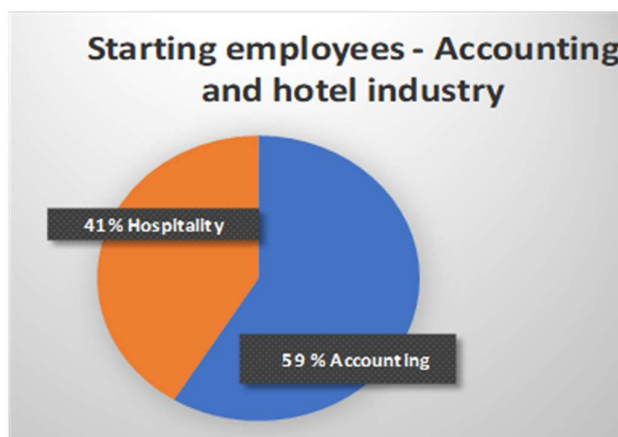


Figure 3 Starting employees - Accounting and hotel industry in Great Britain
Source: eHotelier, UK hospitality education – in decline, 2018

At a global level, hotel industry aims at innovations such as hotels with diminished personnel, the mass introduction of robots or contactless operations. Despite that these solutions are not applicable everywhere, since in most cases travelers and especially guests of high category hotels expect a definite level of service and personal attitude.

Hotel business is a sector with a seasonal character, which on its part has a negative impact on the stability of the work force. As a partial solution of the problem usually the redirecting happens, of personnel from summer to winter resorts and the other way about. This redirection has a weak efficiency, since it creates

difficulties for the employees regarding the continuous travel and the lack of stability and a settled way of live. After the Covid pandemic in more and more cases cadres avoid employment in the hotel sector, due to the direct contact with customers. The industry has still not found an overall resolving of the situation. The work is often perceived as fit for students, people without a "convertible" education or immigrants. They either use the job positions in hotel industry as a stepping-stone to a better work, or a temporary work, to earn additional money.

The difficulties in retaining quality personnel do not make a difference between enterprises and industries. They are always harmful, destructive and expensive for the business, expressed in resources, as well as efforts. The loss of employees for almost any reason is an expensive endeavor due to the time and finances, necessary for the hotels to find, interview, hire and train new members of personnel. In hotel industry however, the fluctuation and low levels of retention are particularly disastrous, since employees are the face of the hotels and they constantly interact directly with visitors. Some of the main reasons are:

- Unclear work expectations;
- Inefficient communication;
- Minimal growth opportunities;
- Interrupted connection with managers.

The working time is long and includes night shifts, as well as shifts on the weekend and/or during holidays. The salaries are usually lower for employees, working in the hotel business. Because of the pronounced seasonality, that new employees are appointed at the peak periods of the year and are discharged in the periods out of the seasonal overload. Although these problems contribute for the growth of this factor, bad management is often the biggest culprit. Often in the hotel industry managers manage departments with many employees. That often as well, managers are not correctly trained to be efficient, but are rather put at a managerial position without experience or adequate skills. The untrained or inexperienced managers can lead to a whole department of inefficient, displeased employees. If they do not know what their work includes, they could be disappointed and counterproductive, creating a negative effect at the workplace. A manager has to have skills for work with people, in order to be able to work with the employees and the customers as well. They also must have experience at a leading position, so that they feel comfortable managing and leading the personnel. The mere promotion of an employee of many years to a leading position and the expecting from them to know how to be a manager does not work.

Similar to many industries, which are service oriented, employees usually experience high levels of stress, which combined with ineffective decision-making by the managers make fluctuations inevitable. The unsatisfied employees with a low moral simply do not have the stimulus to go beyond the expectations of neither the managers, nor of customers. Such circumstances are particularly dangerous in the industry, since the service with a lower quality influence directly the customers' satisfaction and finally the brand reputation. Having in mind the importance of social influence on contemporary market, the negative reviews and low assessments can undermine the business promptly.

Employees in the industry besides, find themselves often in dangerous situations as a part of their work. The management has to realize the importance of observing the rules for work safety, in order to avoid injuries and court proceedings. In spite of that, many employees discover, that their hotel or restaurant has no introduced safety rules, or that the introduced rules are not observed. With so many possibilities of injury - in staircases, in the kitchen, the breaking of glass, cleaning chemicals and many others - the guaranteeing of the observing of safety rules turns into a serious concern for the hotels. This can not only create confusion for the members of personnel but can also cause problems with the health and safety in the object.

The unethical business practices and unhealthy culture will inevitably harm the hotel sector, the work force and the future vitality of the industry. For the industry, where the competition is fierce and the customer base is unstable, the conclusions, collected by feedback, could be the difference between a stable organization which surpasses the others in customers' servicing, and such, which only struggles to remain in the market.

Certainly, the insufficient training and development also play a considerable role for the high levels of quitting of employees. The low levels of personnel retention leave the management with less possibilities for choice and often lead to insufficiently trained and poorly prepared employees, appointed at critical for the business job positions without the necessary skills and knowledge. This comprehension sounds to be true for the roles in customer service, as well as for the managers. The overall lack of preparation and professionalism in the end will have a cascade effect, which exercises influence on the customers' satisfaction.

3. Recommendations

In Bulgaria the problem with the lack of work force is resolved partially by the hiring of personnel from other countries. The situation would improve, if the visa regime is facilitated and the possibilities of

hiring foreigners for 9, 12 and even 24 months, in order to fill the vacant working positions in the seasonal and all year-round tourist destinations. Possibilities could be sought besides, for the attracting of personnel from countries such as Turkey or countries in Asia such as India and the Philippines

The high levels of fluctuation evidently demand a constant inflow of new cadres, in order to adequately fill all available positions. In spite of that, the industry experiences difficulties with the continuous personnel recruitment with skills, necessary for success even with workplaces at an initial level, because of:

- Insufficiency of skills;
- Constantly high levels of fluctuation;
- Ability for the retention of good employees

The implementation of an efficient feedback system is a recommendable instrument for the organizations for the continuous monitoring of the satisfaction levels in the hotel industry. The frequent research and different forms of surveys can secure to the management a much better understanding of the employees' experience and in each moment and in real time. Such feedback can be used for the direction of the management's decisions and the minimizing of the devastating effects from the fluctuations of personnel.

It is important the people to perceive their work in the hotel industry as an attractive step in their career development. It is recommended to focus on the fact, that it develops the communicative skills, and the ability to communicate is essential in almost any other profession and especially the ones, connected with sales. It is necessary to emphasize on what the possibilities for development in personal and professional relation in this field are.

In addition to the communicative skills, the hotel professions cultivate a number of other qualities and skills, which are applicable in different fields. The ability to take fast decisions in stress situations, knowledge of the cultural peculiarities of the different peoples, the possibility of learning and improving foreign languages - the list could be continued, but the basic idea is clear - in their communication with potential employees, hoteliers should accentuate on the "added value", which this vocation brings as well.

The ability to make a fast choice during unfavorable circumstances, information about the social characteristics of the different nationalities, the skills of learning foreign languages are favorable factors for hotel industry as a place for career development. In their communication with prospective personnel members, it is necessary for the hoteliers to emphasize the additional opportunities, which are connected with the work in hotel industry.

Another method for stimulating the personnel is the granting of additional benefits, in addition to the usual increase of salaries. Examples for such activities is the granting of money bonuses for the implementation of an assigned task, bonuses for sales in the reception department, team building, vouchers for sport, shopping vouchers, free food and flexible working hours. The idea is the message to be transmitted, that the sector appreciates and rewards loyal employees.

A recommendation for the solving of the problem with fluctuation, is the hotels to start organizing various courses and programs for qualification and training of personnel. A big part of the employees seeks a professional development, which offers development of new skills and growth. An example of such an activity is a given hotel to give an opportunity for the bellboy to become a receptionist, concierge or a front office manager.

The online training is an efficient way for employees' development in the hotel industry, especially in the moment. It is useful for the workers in the following ways:

- Videos are a more engaging way for training in comparison to the reading of documents or articles;
- A return of the investment can be secured to the employers;
- People prone to learn online are several times more in comparison to other media channels;
- This is more advantageous for the employers.

It is visible, that the benefits from investment in the development of employees in hotel business are winning for the organizations as well as for themselves. When managers in the hotel industry invest in the future of their employees, they invest in the future of business.

For the guaranteeing of a safe working environment there has to be a scope of written standard operative procedures, so that the employees know what is expected from them. Hotels bear the responsibility to inform their employees about the necessary safety procedures. The performance of training at the workplace helps to guarantee, that the staff knows what to do in a case of accident or an emergency situation.

The organizing of professional training and education is recommended, as well as the provision of safety at the workplace. This includes a well differentiated regulation for the internal labor order, a positive professional atmosphere, good communication and financial security.

Another important moment is to give the personnel the opportunity to take decisions. When the employees lack self-confidence and trust in the management, the hotel has to rely on more human resources, in order to overcome problems, which in reality could be resolved easily. Through the increase of skills, the

personnel will feel more confident to take these important decisions and to cope with problems, which will then lead to the removal of problems and successfully manageable situations. Finally, a hotel is as strong as the ones who manage it, so the industry has to get assured, that it has the best and the most qualified personnel.

Everywhere, where the hotel business cannot meet the needs of its activity of human resource, it could cover the lack with quality software. It on its part could rationalize and automatize the processes, freeing the time of the personnel, who can deal with more important issues, such as the provision of first class servicing and experience for the customers.

Another method for retention and perfection of the personnel is the provision of courses and seminars for the development of the so called "soft skills". According to Psychological centre S.O.V.A (2021): Soft skills include our capabilities to negotiate, to manage our time, our way of communication, our ability to listen, our empathy, our skill to maintain relationships, etc. They are this kind of "human" knowledge which does not relate to that if we have technical expertise or knowledge in a definite field. Soft skills are fundamental at work with a team or customers, but they are important not only in the professional sphere - but these are also skills which suppose success in any situation, in which we have to interact with other people. For the hotel industry important soft skills can be communication skills, creativity, initiative, and ability to work in a team, conflict-solving, the building of trust, skills for prioritizing of tasks, decision-making, and negotiations. The greater part from these capabilities are not taught at schools or universities, but are at the same time sought and valued in the industry, and at work with people as a whole. The creation of programs for training would assist the comprehensions about work in the sphere to change from just work or seasonal employment to comprehensions about a real career, providing an all-embracing personality and professional development.

4. Conclusion

The hotel industry has always had to balance the challenges of the care for its employees and the care for its customers at the same time. The constantly changing aspects impact the whole business and the employees. The industry was affected besides, by the pandemic of Covid-19 and now by the continuing military operations in Ukraine.

Human resource management is a critical and decisive component in any organization, moreover for organizations in the hotel sector, which flourish in the servicing of customers and other services. It is a key function in the sector, bearing in mind that hotels depend on their employees as sources of distinctive competitive advantage. Consequently, personnel management has to be practiced by applying all possible good practices, in order to guarantee the commercial vitality of companies in the sector.

The elaboration examines some of the most important challenges which the hotel industry faces, including the current business environment and human resources. One of the best ways to overcome the problems is the investment in human resources. The finding of qualified personnel, which is capable of managing a hotel is the most certain way to guests' satisfaction and their retention. This at the same time is one of the most important challenges for the hotels since employees are the face of the business.

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