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IMPROVING HOTEL PERFORMANCE IN THE “NEW NORMAL” BUSINESS CONTEXT

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Abstract

Fast technological advancement, combined with effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, has brought about numerous social and economic changes, and imposed challenges to the hotel industry. On the other hand, demographic changes, such as population ageing, also affect the demand side of the hotel business. The aim of this paper is to highlight the characteristics of a new business environment, often referred to as “new normal”, and to provide implications for hotel managers how to succeed in such an environment. The study reveals that the “new normal” business context demands changes in marketing approach, risk management and supply chain management. Accordingly, attention is drawn to the concepts of customisation, diversification and agility. Making hotel services accessible to a wider population is considered as a potential for improving hotel performance, as elderly and disabled population represent significant market segment which is often neglected. By orienting towards the needs of elderly, hotel companies proactively respond to emerging demographic changes.

Key Words: *hotel performance, “new normal”, customisation, accessibility, diversification, agility*

JEL classification: *M10, Z31*

Introduction

A pandemic caused by the COVID-19 virus has provoked an economic and social crisis of global dimensions, with the hotel industry being one of the hardest hit. The factor that has contributed the most to the hotel industry suffering significant losses is individualized way of working. This refers to

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providing hotel services to guests personally, what imposes a need for guests's physical presence in a hotel. Due to the pandemic measures that restricted movement of people, many tourists were not able to use hotel services in other countries or even in other districts within the same country. Furthermore, many tourists voluntarily gave up using hotel services due to the possibility of infection. As a result, the hotel industry faced a sharp and drastic drop in demand, and known demand management strategies were not applicable in such circumstances. Another feature of the hotel business that has made it impossible to adjust supply to demand is the inability to store services until demand grows again. Hotel employees faced temporary or permanent job loss, which caused stress and a decline in popularity of this industry on the labor market. The application of technological advances, which have enabled distance working, meetings and gatherings, has further reduced the need for hotel services.

Although the end of the pandemic is not in sight, crisis in the hotel business has taken on a somewhat milder form due to appearance of vaccines, alleviation of restrictions on movement, measures to protect guests in a hotel, as well as due to aspiration of guests to return to normal life. However, the problem that tourism destinations' stakeholders still face is the unpredictable development of pandemics and protection measures, such as closing state borders, COVID passes, etc. Since the level of demand is far below that before the pandemic, hotels need to implement appropriate recovery strategies.

This paper aims to analyse a new business context in which hotels operate, which is remarkably affected by the pandemic, but also to a large extent by technological advancement and demographic changes. The task is to provide implications for hotel managers on how to improve business performance in a changing business environment. These implications mainly refer to the areas of risk management, marketing management and supply chain management. More specifically, hotel companies should make services more accessible and customise them to the emerging guests' needs. Diversification of service portfolio is proposed as a strategy to ensure additional revenue, and also to mitigate negative effects of similar crisis in the future. Finally, this work emphasizes the importance of agility, which can be assured through an effective supply chain management.

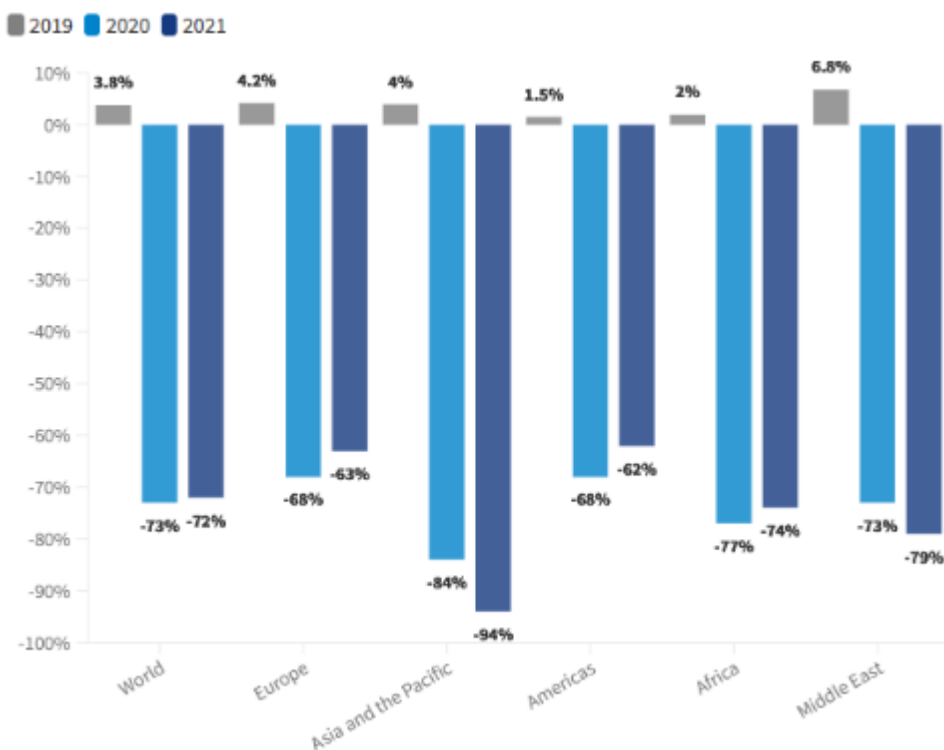
The state of “new normal”

The COVID-19 pandemic has altered significantly the environment in which hotel companies operate. Several authors refer to the new business context as a “new normal” (Alonso et al., 2020; Foroudi et al., 2021; Jiménez-Barreto et al., 2021; Jones & Comfort, 2020; Kim et al., 2021; Rivera et al., 2021; Shin & Kang, 2020; Smart et al., 2021; Sobaih et al., 2021). It can be described as a situation in which hotel demand is more sensitive due to legal requirements such as green passport, social distancing or travel restrictions, but also due to traveler’s fear of infection, and lower disposable income. The contemporary IT solutions appeared to be a good strategy during the pandemic, however, the right balance between human contact and technology needs to be found. As Bharwani & Mathews (2021) state, enhanced guest experience comes from connecting high touch with high tech. This means that technology should not be a substitute for personal service, but rather a complement, helping to serve guests better, reduce human errors, increase efficiency and personalize service.

Hidalgo et al. (2022) state that in the last twenty years, phenomena that can be compared to the COVID-19 pandemic are SARS (2003), swine flu (2009), MERS (2012), Ebola (2013) and Zika virus (2015). The authors find four fundamental differences between the pandemic caused by the COVID-19 virus and previous occurrences, namely: intensity, geographical coverage, duration and level of uncertainty. According to STR (2021), 2020 was the worst year in the history of the hotel industry, with year-over-year decline in the U.S. hotels occupancy by 33.3%, average daily rate by 21.3%, and revenue per available room by 47.5%. Uncertainty regarding duration of the pandemic, virus mutations and legal measures impacts behaviour of tourists in the way that they are less prone to travel, especially on large distances, and they also avoid long-term reservations. Tourism destinations which significantly rely on international tourism were particularly affected. Many hotel companies switched focus to the domestic travelers. While tourists can travel on shorter journeys by their own cars, long-distance travel involves the use of international means of transport, which may be unavailable or with a variable schedule and price. Fast changing conditions affect all participants of the tourism supply chain, including transportation companies which may even cancel their services according to the situation with pandemic and actual legal regulations. Such circumstances and increased prices of transportation services negatively affect tourists’ propensity to travel.

According to the UNWTO (2022) tourism grew in 2021 by 4%, but is still 72% below the pre-pandemic levels (Figure 1). In case of some regions such as Asia and the Pacific, and Middle East, further drop in international arrivals can be observed.

Figure 1: *International tourists' arrivals % change 2019 through 2021*



Source: *World Tourism Organization (UNWTO). Tourism Grows 4% in 2021 but Remains Far Below Pre-Pandemic Levels*, <https://www.unwto.org/news/tourism-grows-4-in-2021-but-remains-far-below-pre-pandemic-levels>, (9 February 2022)

In Serbia, there was 27.9% increase in overnight stays for the first three quarters of 2021 compared to the same period of the previous year (Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, 2021). Tourism started to recover during the 2nd and the 3rd quarter of 2021, especially regarding international tourists' overnight stays which increased significantly (Table 1).

Table 1: *The comparison of overnight stays of the first three quarters of 2020 and 2021*

	2020			2021		
	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q1	Q2	Q3
Domestic tourists' overnight stays	101.5	39.3	113.0	91.9	188.5	103.6
Foreign tourists' overnight stays	93.2	8.9	17.9	48.3	535.8	412.6
Total overnight stays	98.3	28.1	74.9	76.1	228.4	133.3

Source: *Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, Trends, III Quarter 2021, p. 47.*

The “new normal” in the hotel business is also characterized by focus on hygiene, social distancing and use of technology to reduce human contact. Although traditionally guests favored personal contact over technology during their stay in a hotel, for the time of the pandemic their preferences changed (Kim et al., 2021). Terminals for self check-in and self check-out, robotic staff at reception, housekeeping, restaurant, room service and kitchen, as well as mobile applications proved to be very useful for social distancing. Pappas & Glyptou (2021) find that due to the pandemic health protection and safety have growing importance when evaluating quality of hotel services. Moreover, Yu et al. (2021) find that during the pandemic hygiene plays a key role when it comes to perceived quality of hotel service, guest satisfaction, revisit intention, word of mouth, and a hotel's image. As the awareness of people regarding factors affecting their health and available protective means and measures increased during the COVID-19 pandemic, it is reasonable to expect that the new hygiene standards and technologies will remain in use also after the pandemic.

Hotels have experienced hard times during the pandemic worldwide, but the intensity of the pandemic's negative impact varied among them. Those hotels which had diversified service, i.e. provided catering services or performing some other activities apart from accommodation, could stay open and function during the lockdown. One of the lessons learned from this pandemic is that hotels should diversify their service portfolio in order to overcome crisis. The next lesson refers to ensuring sufficient financial reserves to prevent bankruptcy during the downturn (Wieczorek - Kosmala, 2021). It seems that many hotels did not attach enough importance to low-probability high-impact events, such as pandemic, within their risk

analysis, and consequently, did not prepare contingency plans as suggested by Rivera et al. (2021). Hidalgo et al. (2022) present hotel management strategies in times of crisis, which relate to human resources, marketing, innovation, finance, state aid, planning and information and others. The human resources strategy seeks to reduce labor costs, which can be achieved by reducing the number of workers or working hours, unpaid leave, reducing wages, hiring external associates or redirecting activities from external associates to overcapacity employees. Marketing strategy involves changing the orientation to certain market segments and the domestic market, reducing prices and advertising campaigns. Measures related to innovation include the use of technology to reduce personal contact, personalize services, new products and services, or improve the quality of existing ones. Financial strategies include reducing non-essential costs, postponing investments, securing loans and redefining payment deadlines to suppliers. Cooperation with state institutions also plays an important role in providing assistance in the form of subsidies or delays in paying taxes. Furthermore, regular monitoring and assessment of the situation, internal and external communication, as well as cooperation within the branch and the implementation of an integrated situation plan are an indispensable part of the measures of the hotel companies to survive in a pandemic or similar crisis.

The new business context, apart from the legacy of the pandemic, can be described as a very dynamic one, as technological advancement, intensive competition and sophisticated demand resulted in a shorter product life cycle, shorter product development and production time. Time is perceived as one of the most important factors of competitiveness, so the speed of product/service development, production and delivery is vital for a company's success. Apart from speed, customisation is gaining on importance, and it refers to adjusting the product/service features to the specific needs of customers. Modern companies need to provide quality goods at competitive prices, and to be flexible to customise the offer to the customers' needs (Milovanović & Janošević, 2019). Since contemporary market is turbulent, companies are supposed to adjust to sudden changes and, therefore, need to be responsive and agile. This can be achieved through effective supply chain management, where companies intensively collaborate with fewer chosen partners, share real-time information and adjust goals and strategies in order to respond timely to the end-customer requirements. It is important for hotel companies to establish a close cooperation with partners upstream and downstream the supply chain in order to achieve superior performance over its competitors. Competitive advantage comes from integration and coordination of the supply chain members'

activities, timely information sharing, and joint planning. Information technologies play a vital role in supply chain management and can be also seen as a key enabler of companies' agility (Milovanović et al., 2021).

Increasing accessibility of hotel services

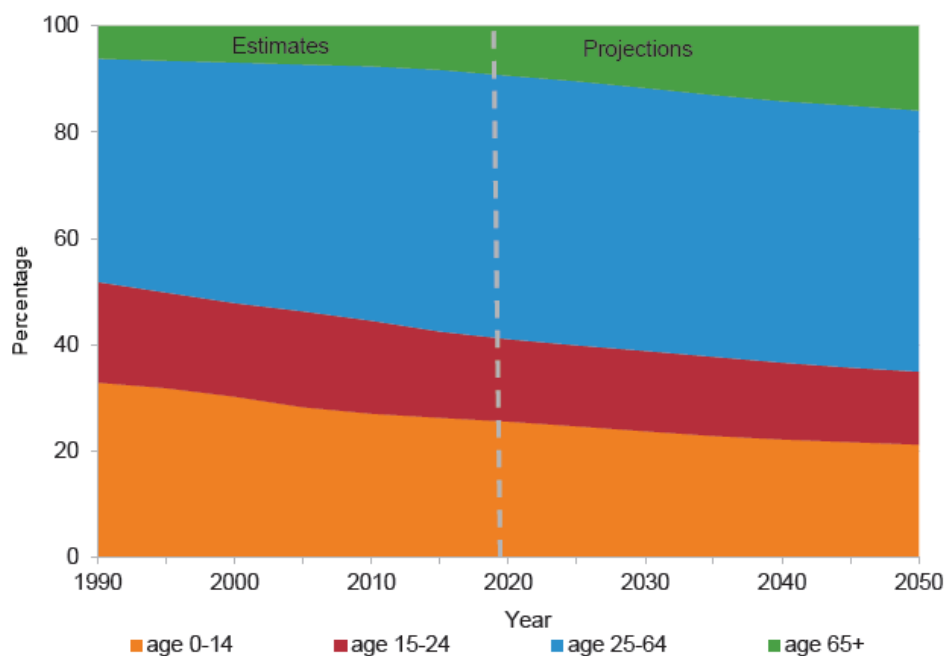
With the development of civilization, the status of tourism changes from being socially desirable to being a necessity (Agovino et al., 2017). UNWTO Global Code of Ethics for Tourism underlines that all persons have rights to enjoy tourism (UNWTO, 2016). Tourism helps people to integrate and establish social contacts, contributing to a positive emotional state and personal development. Accessible tourism refers to equal opportunities for all people to participate in tourism, regardless of their needs, characteristics or capabilities. The roots of accessible tourism can be found in Manila Declaration from 1980, when the WTO recognized tourism as a fundamental right for human development (Lima, 2020). Empirical research shows that leisure impacts positively on tourists' experience, satisfaction and perceived quality of life (Kim et al., 2015; Agovino et al., 2017). Having this in mind, services should be made available to people who currently face barriers to participate in tourism in order to enhance their satisfaction and quality of life.

The most significant barriers to travel are different types of disabilities, such as mobility, vision, hearing or cognitive impairments, but also those connected to age, language, religion or culture. It is estimated that over one billion of the world population has some kind of disability that prevents them from travel and tourism (UNWTO, 2016). Families with children or people with pets also have specific needs. Hussien & Jones (2016, p. 57) refer to the WHO classification of types of people with disabilities: “i) people in wheelchairs; ii) people who experience difficulties with independent mobility without the need of additional devices; such as a walker, cane or crutches; iii) elderly people; iv) infants and children under 5 years old; v) the visually impaired; vi) people with hearing disabilities; vii) people suffering from heart disease, arthritis, asthma,; viii) people suffering from panic attacks and various phobias; ix) pregnant women; x) people with mobility difficulties resulting from a previous disease or accident; xi) people who are mentally retarded.” The cumulative result may be that large portion of the world population is not involved in tourism activities.

Demographic change requires special attention, as population aging is a rising opportunity for the tourism industry. It is estimated by the WHO that

people over age 60 will represent 22% of the world population by 2050 (UNWTO, 2016). In 2018 for the first time in history the number of people aged over 64 years surpassed the number of children aged less than 5 years (Ritchier & Roser, 2019). Figure 2 presents change in the age structure of global population based on estimation for the period 1990-2020 and projections for 2020-2050. It can be observed that percentage of population above 65 years old is rising, while the percentage of youth (0-24) is declining. More longitudinal change is presented on Figure 3.

Figure 2: *Change in world population age structure*

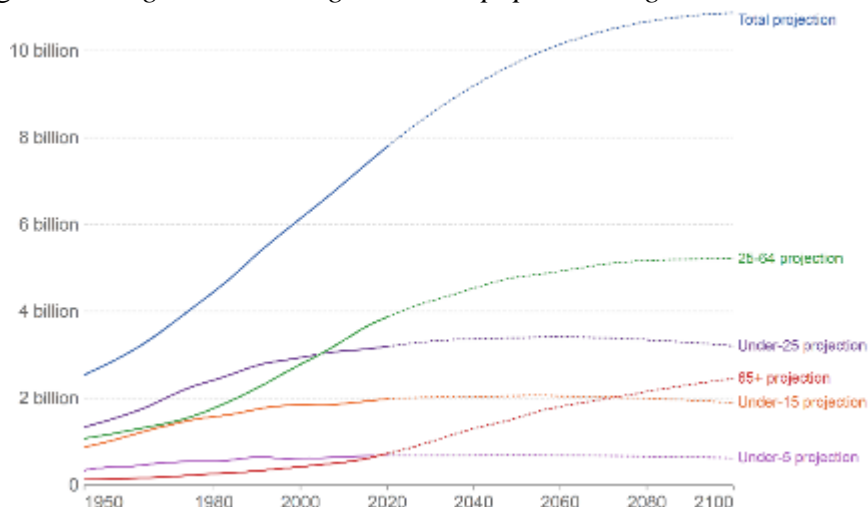


Source: *United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2019). World Population Ageing 2019.*

Aging is usually related to certain body impairments because of which elderly often face barriers to travel and enjoy tourism services. The outcome of this situation is twofold. Firstly, it negatively impacts the quality of life of those people who are prevented to participate in tourism, and secondly, it also negatively affects the tourism industry in terms of turnover, income, employment etc. However, such global trend of aging population can be also observed as an opportunity for the tourism industry to provide senior-friendly products and services (Liew et al., 2021). Elderly and disabled people constitute economically significant and steadily growing part of the population and, consequently, it is an attractive tourism market (Tutuncu,

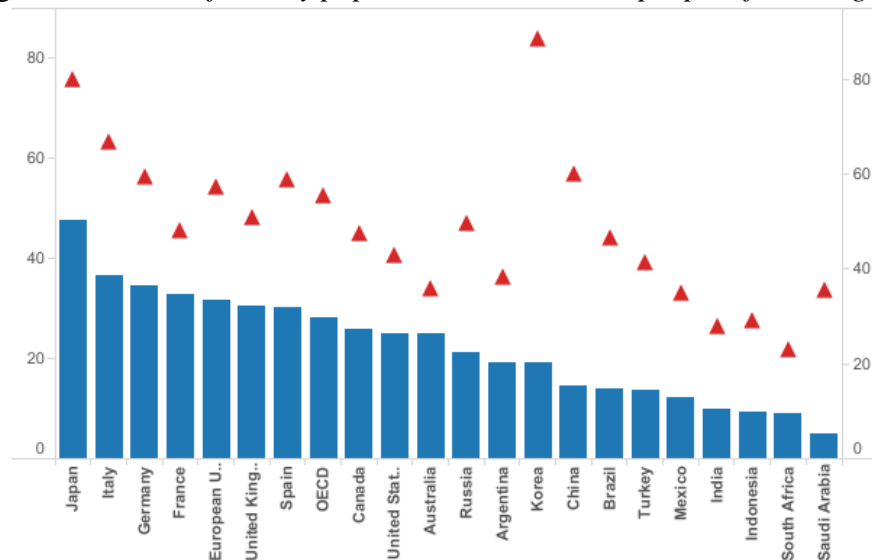
2017). People with disabilities usually travel with accompanying persons, so the market in question is even larger. Accessible tourism enables such market potential to be realised with benefits for travelers, service providers, local population, as well as for destinations and countries.

Figure 3: *Longitudinal change in world population age structure*



Source: *Ritchie, H. and Roser, M., Age Structure*, <https://ourworldindata.org/age-structure>, (9 February 2022)

Figure 4: *Portion of elderly population in relation to people of working age*



Source: *OECD, Ageing and demographic change*, <https://www.oecd.org/economy/ageing-inclusive-growth/>, (9 February 2022)

Figure 4 shows the number of elderly population (over age 65) per 100 people of working age (20-64). It can be observed that Japan is facing the fastest population ageing, but also many other countries experience this phenomenon. Red arrows show the portion of elderly compared to working-age population by 2060.

Accessibility is a quality criterion (Calvo-Mora et al., 2015) that impacts tourists' decision making process and satisfaction. Accommodation accessibility may refer to physical, sensory or communication access. Apart from room, wellness and restaurant, lobby and other physical spaces, hotels' website and reservation process also need to be adjusted to the specific needs of people. It means that sufficient information should be available in adequate format (Agovino et al., 2017). The adjustments would also involve staff training to serve people with specific needs. Moris et al. (2019) identify that there is a lack of staff training resulting in low awareness of different requirements of people with disabilities and seniors. In order to prevent the formation of the so called "isolated islands" the adjustments should involve all parts of the tourism supply chain. Calvo-Mora et al. (2015) find strong commitment of hotel managers in Seville towards accessibility and awareness of accessibility as a differentiation factor improving the image of the hotel. However, there is insufficient staff training and involvement of hotels in bodies dealing with barrier-free tourism, such as networks, forums, and associations. Hussien & Jones (2016) performed an Importance-Performance Analysis to identify the importance of specific requirements of people with disabilities and, at the same time, hotels' performance regarding those requirements. As a result, the authors indicate areas that need special attention, areas which are well managed, areas with low priority, and areas where resources are wasted. Such analysis is crucial to meet the guests' requirements at a high level and drive competitiveness.

Some countries have mandatory provisions for hotels regarding the portion of barrier-free rooms. Moreover, there are national and international agencies that promote barrier-free tourism and help disseminate the knowledge about its effective implementation, such as The German National Coordination Office for Tourism for All, European Network for Accessible Tourism (ENAT), etc. The International Organisation for Standardization (ISO) has developed an international standard related to accessible tourism - ISO 21902. The standard sets requirements and provides recommendations and guidelines to facilitate equal access to tourism services by people of all ages and abilities. The aim of the standard

is to bring consistency and clarity across countries on how to make tourism facilities and services accessible, and especially across the whole tourism supply chain. Further, some countries lacked standards and guidelines for tourism providers on how to enable barrier-free tourism.

Accessible tourism is not only a social responsibility, but also an economic rationale, as significant number of world population face barriers to exercise tourism, whether permanently or temporary. Barrier-free tourism is perceived as a factor of competitive advantage of those tourism actors who are responsive to various needs of users, including disabled people (Calvo-Mora et al., 2015). Some authors argue that technology improvement would not be that useful in competitive race, but better personalized service and value for all guests. As Petrenko et al. (2021) state, a modern hotel enterprise should be the place where guests can receive the full range of necessary services. Hotels nowadays offer many opportunities for guest to rest and have a unique experience through design and comfort of the room, as well as through numerous services, such as wellness & spa. Melynkova et al. (2020) assert that hotel enterprises through innovation increase competitiveness and decrease environmental stress, but can also help resolve social problems by offering barrier-free services. Moreover, hotel companies face intensive competition, especially from alternative accommodation providers, such as Airbnb. Their survival and sustainable growth depend on their flexibility and responsiveness in customising the offer to the needs of various types of guests. Accessible tourism opens new possibilities for hotel companies to increase their market share, income, service quality, guest satisfaction and loyalty, and decrease negative effects of seasonality. At the same time, it impacts positively on social welfare by enabling people with different types of disabilities to enjoy tourism services. As portion of elderly population is rising, especially in high-income countries, it could become an interesting market segment for hotel companies. Moreover, many potential tourists face language barriers which may be surpassed in a hotel by using QR codes, applications for translation or robots programmed to speak more languages. Lifestyle, culture or religion could also be a cause of specific needs limiting travel and leisure opportunities. Thus, hotel companies should take into consideration the possibility of customising the offer in that respect as well.

Sezgin et al. (2019) compare the actual state of hotels in the Konya province with international accessibility standards for hotel businesses and identify some deviations as a result of certain limitations that make

impossible meeting the standards. Lima (2020) finds out that the predominant problem in barrier-free tourism in Spain is a lack of specialized services, distribution of information and communication strategies. Nazli & Kesici (2018) show that hotels' websites are not well-structured to support social inclusion of people with disabilities. Martin-Fuentes et al. (2021) state that barrier-free hotel infrastructure varies among countries, and the prevalent adaptations are related to the mobility barriers, while sensory disabilities are neglected. Examples presented above clearly demonstrate that there is much room for improvement of hotel service adjusted to population with special needs. In time of economic slowdown during and after the COVID-19 pandemic and increasing competition especially coming from the sharing economy, orientation towards this specific market segment may help hotel companies to differentiate and improve business performance. Customers value socially responsible businesses, so opening towards those who could not previously use hotel services may have positive marketing effect on the wider population.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic was a major challenge for the hotel business worldwide. It has brought sharp demand decline, uncertainty, economic slowdown, inflation, unemployment, stress, as well as financial problems. Such lasting and devastating pandemic is a low-probability high-impact event that was not attached sufficient attention by many hotels' risk management. Those hotels which kept financial reserves and diversified service portfolio to include catering or other sort of services that do not depend on customer physical presence at the hotel achieved better performance during the pandemic. Information and communication technologies enabled social distancing and distance working for staff. Hygienic standards have risen and it seems that these are likely to remain after the pandemic and keep impacting the quality of hotel services.

A new business context for hotel companies is not only shaped by the pandemic and technology, but also by changing customer needs. Nowadays, customers expect unique experience and services tailored to their expectations, demanding from hotels to be highly responsive in customising the offer. Agility of the hotel business, which refers to the ability to adjust quickly to changes in demand, can be achieved through an effective supply chain management. By sharing real-time information with supply chain partners, close collaboration and joint planning hotels, as well

as all partners in the supply chain, may achieve superior performance over their competitors.

Intensive competition coming from other hotels, but also from the sharing economy, imposes the need for hotels to redefine marketing strategies. Apart from more flexible cancellation policies and promotional offerings, hotels should consider opening towards currently neglected markets. This is especially important taking into account the trend of demographic changes, which clearly indicates world population ageing. Some countries, especially the high-income ones, experience very fast population ageing. Ageing is often connected to some forms of disability, thus serving elderly people requires certain adjustments of hotel services. In other terms, it is necessary to make hotel services accessible to the wider population. There are many young people with different types of disability who are willing to travel, but due to inaccessibility of hotel or other services they are not able to participate in tourism. Furthermore, language, culture, religion or lifestyle may cause hotel services to be insufficiently accessible to certain people. Considering the sources of limited accessibility of hotel services and customising the offer to surpass the barriers would be beneficial for both hotel companies and tourists, contributing positively to people's quality of life, but also to a hotel's image and profitability.

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