

СЪВРЕМЕННИ ПРЕДИЗВИКАТЕЛСТВА ПРЕД ТУРИЗМА
СБОРНИК ДОКЛАДИ ОТ МЕЖДУНАРОДНА НАУЧНА КОНФЕРЕНЦИЯ
12 МАЙ 2022 ГОДИНА

ВЫЗОВЫ СОВРЕМЕННОГО ТУРИЗМА
СБОРНИК ДОКЛАДЫ ОТ МЕЖДУНАРОДНОЙ НАУЧНОЙ КОНФЕРЕНЦИИ
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CONTEMPORARY TOURISM CHALLENGES
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INNOVATION IN RESPONSE TO THE CHALLENGES OF HOTEL COMPANIES CAUSED BY THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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***Abstract:** Innovations are the key drivers of business activities in modern business conditions. The pandemic crisis has caused significant changes in the business environment of hotel companies. Innovation is recognized as a good tool for adapting to changing environmental conditions. In addition to the development of innovation, an additional challenge that hotel management faces in times of crisis relates to the profitability of investing in innovation. It is necessary to determine whether the limited and reduced budget, due to the crisis, can withstand additional financial investments in innovation. Therefore, it is necessary to investigate whether and how innovations in the hotel business can contribute to the successful adaptation of business to external circumstances. The aim of this paper is to, based on a review of previous research, describe the role and importance of innovation in hotels during the crisis. The research questions will be analysed using the method of analysis and synthesis as well as the method of induction and deduction. Innovations in the hotel would mean adapting/improving the business to a level that provides hotel guests with a healthy environment, safety and security in terms of regular hygiene in hotels and as well as additional training of employees to provide services safely. In order to ensure the profitability of investments in innovations, it is necessary to analyse in detail the wishes and needs of guests and how much could innovations satisfy these needs.*

***Keywords:** innovation, hotels, entrepreneurship, Covid-19*

Introduction

Innovations are the result of an entrepreneurial mindset. They contribute to improving the productivity, competitive position and profit of companies (Campo, Diaz & Yague, 2014). The importance of innovation for the business of companies has been recognized in a very turbulent environment (Campo, Diaz & Yague, 2014), as well as in times of crisis (Bhasin & Kumar, 2022). Tourism and hospitality is a dynamic activity (Kessler et al., 2015), characterized by the need for continuous development of innovation (Valença et al., 2020). However, crisis situations can inhibit the innovation process, as worrying about incurring costs that cannot be reimbursed in the near future creates uncertainty about possible irreparable losses (Santos et al., 2021). On the one hand, there is a need in hotels to develop innovation as a possible tool for adapting to crisis situations. On the other hand, investing in innovation incurs certain costs, which can further burden the hotel budget, which has already been reduced due to the smaller volume of business in a pandemic.

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Studies on innovation in tourism and hospitality are still rare and insufficient (Wikhamn, Armbrecht & Wikhamn, 2018; Valença et al., 2020). The hotel industry is not recognized as an innovation-intensive activity (Wikhamn, Armbrecht & Wikhamn, 2018), but most innovations are based on improving or upgrading existing services. One reason may be that only a small number of hotels have recognizable processes and departments for service innovation (Anthonisz, 2014). When developing and creating innovations, managers are faced with the challenge of how to make an innovation to meet the needs and desires of customers, and at the same time positively contribute to the financial result of the hotel. In some cases, innovation is only needed to maintain current market share, while some other innovations can differentiate service and lead to higher financial gains (Victorino et al., 2005). Brenčić, Pfajfar & Rašković (2012) believe that innovations in times of crisis are insufficient to achieve higher performance, but only represent the basis for survival in the market.

Studies on hotel innovation are lagging behind (Wikhamn, Armbrecht & Wikhamn, 2018), especially research on the importance of innovation in times of crisis. The aim of this paper is to, based on a review of previous research, describe the role and importance of innovation in hotels during the crisis. The observed research gap leads to the analysis of the following research questions:

1. Is the development of innovation in hotels recommended in times of crisis?
2. Is investing in innovation a profitable investment for hotels in times of crisis?

Innovation as a response to the crisis

Innovation is the creation, acceptance and implementation of ideas or behaviours that are new to the company and that arise from the accumulated knowledge of customers, competitors and technologies (Brenčić, Pfajfar & Rašković, 2012). Innovation can also be defined as "the implementation of a new or significantly improved product (good or service), or process, a new marketing method, or a new organizational method in business practice, workplace organization or external relations" (OECD 2005; Kessler et al., 2015, p.1708). Investments in innovation are an integral part of the investment plan of companies in normal conditions and circumstances, while in the period of crisis, allocations for innovation are reduced (Santos et al., 2021). The pandemic crisis, caused by the Covid-19 virus, caused the closure of factories, limited travel, disruption in supply chains, and coping with great financial pressures due to the loss of cash flow (Xiong et al., 2021). Such crisis situations require new operational procedures (Santos et al., 2021), as well as the creation of new innovative solutions in response to current, extraordinary phenomena (Xiong et al., 2021).

Financial support is significant in the period of the pandemic crisis (Dubey et al., 2021), but investments in new innovations are significantly reduced due to short-term orientation towards customer retention and cost reduction (Brenčić, Pfajfar & Rašković, 2012; Lichtenthaler, 2021). On examples from the past, such as the financial crisis of 2008/09, it turned out that these short-term savings have more serious negative consequences on the company's competitiveness (Lichtenthaler, 2021). Therefore, additional sources of funding for innovation, internal or external, need to be found. Dubey et al. (2021) and Xiong et al. (2021) believe that government financial support to companies in times of crisis is of great importance as support for sustainability and reduction of negative consequences. Research also shows that those companies that had a strong emphasis on pre-crisis innovation tend to keep their innovative activities at a relatively high level even during the crisis (Lichtenthaler, 2021). Other companies focus on other drivers of results and tend to reduce their innovation activities, which are already relatively modest (Lichtenthaler, 2021).

Research shows that orientation towards different types of innovation can be a significant factor in overcoming the crisis through innovation. Santos et al. (2021) believe that frugal innovation has a particularly important role in crisis periods, especially in emerging markets. Frugal innovation is a type of innovation that is based on the limited use of resources with the basic goal of reducing costs, focusing on functionality and sustainable joint creation. Dubey et al. also write about the importance of frugal innovation in times of crisis. (2021). Lichtenthaler (2021) emphasizes the importance of second-order innovations in times of crisis, which describe the dynamic transformation of innovation management. Xiong et al. (2021) believe that technological innovation can play a significant role in times of crisis.

Companies that maintain the continuity of innovative activities even in times of crisis, can expect a positive impact of these activities on organizational performance. Companies with innovative capabilities will be able to respond to changes and challenges in the environment faster and better than their competitors, so innovation becomes an important means of company survival and good business results (Brenčić, Pfajfar & Rašković, 2012). Observing an innovation-based view of organizational performance helps to understand the competitive effect of innovations and how they can contribute to the acquisition and maintenance of competitive advantages (Lichtenthaler, 2021). Investing in innovation in times of crisis should by no means be to the detriment of quality (Dubey et al., 2021). Instead, they should be seen as an alternative response to the crisis in a resource-constrained environment (Dubey et al., 2021).

Innovations in hotel management

Tourism and hotel management are a dynamic and highly variable activity, so the need to create innovations arises in order to respond to changing customer requirements (Kessler et al., 2015). On the other hand, in conditions of crisis, global business or political instability, hotels are forced to adapt (Valena et al., 2020). In such conditions, hotels will have to become highly adaptable in fulfilling their basic functions (Anthonisz, 2014), which can be achieved by taking over innovative activities in response to the changing needs of guests. The development of innovation in the hotel industry is supported by technology, including IT, online platforms, and social media, which provides managers with opportunities to engage customers, spread good ideas, feedback (Sarmah, Kamboj & Kandampully, 2018). In addition to technology, other resources that contribute to the development of innovation in hotels are human infrastructure, capital, appropriate space and place (Ziyae, Sadeghi & Golmohammadi, 2022).

Innovation in the hotel sector refers to the implementation of new ideas in the offer of services/products, processes, marketing or business organization (Wikhamn, Armbrecht & Wikhamn, 2018). Although the literature indicates that the hotel sector has limited innovation orientation (Campo, Diaz & Yague, 2014), practice shows that hotels have made significant progress in developing innovations aimed at improving customer service, creating operational efficiency and sustainable business development (Anthonisz, 2014). That is why it should be emphasized that most innovations in the hotel industry represent gradual improvements of the existing offer, and not radical innovations (Kessler et al., 2015).

Creating innovation in the hotel industry implies a focus on the end value to the customer, because it is assumed that customers who experience the added value created by innovation, can continue to use products, processes or services, which will contribute to company growth (Anthonisz, 2014). The authors Sarmah, Kamboj & Kandampully (2018) introduce the term customer innovation, thus indicating the involvement of customers to generate and create new hotel services, according to their wishes and needs, through social media. Sarmah et al. (2021) recommend that guests get involved in the process of innovating services through SNS smartphone apps. Recognizing and meeting customer requirements through the development of innovation would not be possible without human resources and cooperation of employees and customers (Wikhamn, Armbrecht & Wikhamn, 2018). Valena et al. (2020) believe that investing in human capital and establishing systems that enable different integration of knowledge of company members is important for the development of innovation in hotels (Valena et al., 2020). Given the segments of the environment that need to

be considered when creating innovations, the key factors that determine hotel innovation are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Factors determining hotels' innovation

Kessler et al. (2015)	cooperation as trigger for change; acceptance of change; resource based scope for change; pluralism as trigger for change; and loose coupling and error-tolerance
Ziyae, Sadeghi & Golmohammadi (2022)	new technologies, training and development of employees, being up-to-date and adopting new infrastructures
Erkuş-Öztürk (2016)	company type, company size, sector-specific knowledge and collaboration with other companies and institutions
Wikhamn, Armbrecht & Wikhamn (2018)	control processes (such as quality environmental management), IT equipment, communication technologies, gastronomic services, room service, cleaning, safety and laundry

Source: The author

Reasons for implementing innovative activities in the hotel sector Victorino et al. (2005) described as follows. First, from a customer perspective, the hotel sector offers a number of similar, easily replaceable services, which requires efforts to differentiate hotels from competitors. Second, the hospitality industry is changing rapidly due to the acceleration of information technology, so managers will have to make proactive changes that focus even more intensively on customer preferences, quality and technological solutions, in order to remain competitive in such a dynamic environment. Third, travellers today do not show, as in previous decades, true brand loyalty, but strive to choose the best value within their available budget.

The literature identifies key innovations in the hotel industry: „fully integrated management systems; electronic check-ins; radio-frequency identification tags used in laundries and automated uniform dispensing; hotel lobbies as fully integrated social media centres with access to tablets, headphones, touch screens; and iPads in hotel rooms that provide the consumer with the option to alter the lighting, heating, order room service at the touch of a button“ (Anthonisz, 2014, p. 357). New and innovative value drivers should provide and improve functions such as: online reservations, in-room high-speed internet access, customization of room de'cor, and flexible check in/out policies (Victorino et al., 2005).

Although traditionally, the hotel sector is considered rigid and non-innovative, most hotels have introduced at least one type of innovation (Wikhamn, Armbrecht & Wikhamn, 2018). Research (Victorino et al., 2005) shows that hotel service innovation is important when

guests choose a hotel. Most common are service/product and marketing innovations (Wikhamn, Armbrecht & Wikhamn, 2018), aimed at using new technologies, improving customer service and creating operational efficiency (Anthonisz, 2014). The results also show that a balanced configuration of organizational innovation combined with a cautious approach is associated with greater innovation success (Kessler et al., 2015). The results also reveal that improper management and lack of knowledge are the most critical factors behind the failure of service innovation in the hotel industry (Ziyae, Sadeghi & Golmohammadi, 2022).

Conclusion

The fact is that the hotels have faced a great challenge due to the pandemic caused by the Covid-19 virus. After the first wave of the negative impact of this pandemic on the hotel business, the management realized that it had to adapt to the new circumstances or they would close. Innovations are emerging as a basic tool for adapting to changing environmental conditions, typical of entrepreneurial activities. Innovations in the hotel would include adapting/improving the business to a level that provides hotel guests with a healthy environment, safety and security in terms of regular hygiene in hotels and as well as additional training of employees to provide services in a safe way.

Hotels face the challenge of how and how much to develop innovation. On the one hand, adaptation through the improvement of existing services is necessary in order to survive. On the other hand, this adjustment causes costs for the hotel, while most hotels in the previous period operated at the margin of profitability. The choice of investing in innovation depends on several factors, and above all, on the ability of managers to recognize the importance of innovation for hotel guests. A detailed market analysis should be conducted of what guests want from the hotel during the pandemic, how to achieve it, how much it will cost and what benefits it will bring to both guests and the hotel.

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