

Hotel Resilience: Lessons Learned from Crisis Management and Forward-Looking Strategies

Abstract

The hotel industry has encountered numerous challenges, and the COVID-19 pandemic has only heightened the necessity for effective crisis management and resilience strategies. Through a World Café and interviews with industry experts, we have produced research proposals that were translated into managerial recommendations. Based on our findings, we have proposed an AI framework to improve actors' anticipation of future crises using weak signal inputs. We find several key factors that can contribute to hotel resilience during a crisis. These include fostering trust and collaboration, developing crisis management plans, and re-evaluating long-term plans. Additionally, potential pitfalls have been identified, such as the need for significant changes in organizational culture and the risks associated with cutting costs.

Keywords: *crisis management, organizational resilience, employee well-being, improvisation, collaboration, cross-functional training, financial strategies, government support, tourism industry.*

Type: Academic Paper

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic had a profound impact on the global tourism industry, especially hotels. Within months, the sector plunged from growth to crisis. Unlike other industries, tourism services are non-recoverable when missed, causing lasting economic and employment effects. This paper explores resilience in the hotel industry - defined as the capacity to withstand, adapt to, and recover from disruptions. Since crisis preparedness has public good characteristics, investing in it yields broad societal benefits.

However, preparing for future crises is a public good that benefits society as a whole rather than just the individuals or organizations involved in the preparation itself. Such public goods are non-excludable and non-rivalrous, accessible to everyone, with consumption by one entity not depleting availability to others. Crisis preparedness investment, like developing contingency plans and staff training, safeguards businesses and guests and contributes to the wider community's resilience by minimizing crisis disruption and damage.

2. Literature Review

Hotels are highly vulnerable to crises, and past research (e.g., Wang and Richie, 2012; Rousaki et al., 2006) highlights the need for stronger planning and adaptive capabilities.

Brown et al. (2017) demonstrated that the hotel sector's vulnerabilities are multi-faceted and that disaster preparedness has not kept pace with the growing number of people affected by disasters. This highlights the need for continued investment in preparedness and resilience-building: hotel companies must adopt modern strategic management practices to address global crises like COVID-19 (Dimitrios et al., 2020), including agile, adaptive decision-making and a focus on innovation. Given the sector's specificities, industry-specific crisis management frameworks are also essential to meet its unique challenges (Ritchie and Jiang, 2021).

Resilience has become a central tenet of hotel management strategy, with scholars calling for a comprehensive approach. Brown et al. (2018) stress the need for a systemic view, given the interplay of physical, social, and economic factors. Sharma et al. (2021) identify key pillars: government intervention, technological innovation, community relationships, trust, and sustainability - arguing that sustainability should be a cornerstone. Barbhuiya and Chatterjee (2023) note that organizational resilience ensures survival, while psychological resilience enables flourishing. Similarly, Jones et al. (2014) emphasize proactive disaster preparedness. Melián-Alzola et al. (2020) highlight the hotel sector's role in community resilience and CSR's potential to enhance social and human capital. Yet, Dobie et al. (2018) offer a critical view, suggesting that current CSR systems, though commendable, still have room to mature - a theme echoed in our discussions.

Amid unprecedented challenges like the COVID-19 pandemic, strategic management and collaboration have become vital in the hotel industry. Dimitrios et al. (2020) emphasize the value of modern strategic paradigms, particularly agility and innovation. Le and Phi (2021) highlight the

sector's urgent need for business transformation, driven by adaptability and innovation. Building on this, Garrido-Moreno et al. (2021) outline strategic recovery measures, including labor actions, differentiation, market reorientation, and the use of official data. Hidalgo et al. (2022) underscore government intervention as key to improving firms' financial health and supporting recovery. Lastly, Traskevich and Fontanari (2021) argue that embracing destination resilience enhances tourist appeal, product competitiveness, and innovation in tourism models.

3. Methodology

This section outlines our research methodology to explore the question: "How can hoteliers be supported for better foresight and resilience towards future crises?" We employed a mixed-method approach (Creswell and Clark, 2017), combining quantitative analysis and qualitative exploration.

3.1 Quantitative

Between late March and early April 2021, we administered an online questionnaire to hotels in urban areas of Western Switzerland, specifically the French-speaking region. This focus reflected their heightened exposure to the pandemic's fallout. Of the 267 hotels contacted via the Swiss hotel database, 82 responded - a 31% response rate. Most were located in the Canton of Vaud (51%) and Geneva (23%). In terms of ownership, 62% operated independently and 38% were part of chains. The sample included 3-star hotels (43%), 4-star (30%), and 5-star (12%) establishments.

The survey assessed COVID-19's impact, current operational status, and expectations for post-pandemic business travel. It also examined crisis management strategies, from financial adjustments to operational shifts, and explored future resilience through innovations such as cost saving collaborations, product launches, and digital tool integration.

3.2 Qualitative: A World Café workshop

A World Café workshop, held in July 2022 at EHL, provided deeper insights from 81 tourism stakeholders. Designed to maximize engagement, the event began with an introduction to the World Café concept, after which participants were grouped and briefed on the framework. Starting at 10:50 a.m. in a large auditorium, six teams (P1 to P6) rotated among three themed tables (Tables 1–6), each addressing distinct aspects of crisis management and resilience. The setup included table markers, flipcharts, and stationery.

Tables 1 and 4 focused on in-hotel crisis management—challenges, solutions, and pandemic experiences. Tables 2 and 5 examined the broader role of tourism actors, highlighting successes and limitations. Tables 3 and 6 explored future strategies and innovative practices.

Participants recorded key points, which moderators grouped into themes. Rotations every 20 minutes encouraged diverse exchanges. Findings were later summarized by moderators using the 1/4, 2/5, and 3/6 format.

4. Key Findings

4.1 Survey Results

4.1.1 Redefining Business Travel

Following the crisis, Swiss city hotels in French-speaking regions faced the evolving landscape of post-pandemic business travel. Survey results indicated broad consensus: a full return to pre-pandemic levels was unlikely. While some remained optimistic - citing the enduring value of face-to-face interaction - many anticipated reduced business travel budgets due to pandemic-era adjustments and rising airfares.

With companies adopting hybrid work models, reliance on business travel has declined. Though not disappearing entirely, the sector's full recovery appears unlikely given shifting corporate habits. For surveyed hoteliers, the path forward lies in embracing flexibility, promoting direct sales, and collaborating with local stakeholders to adapt.

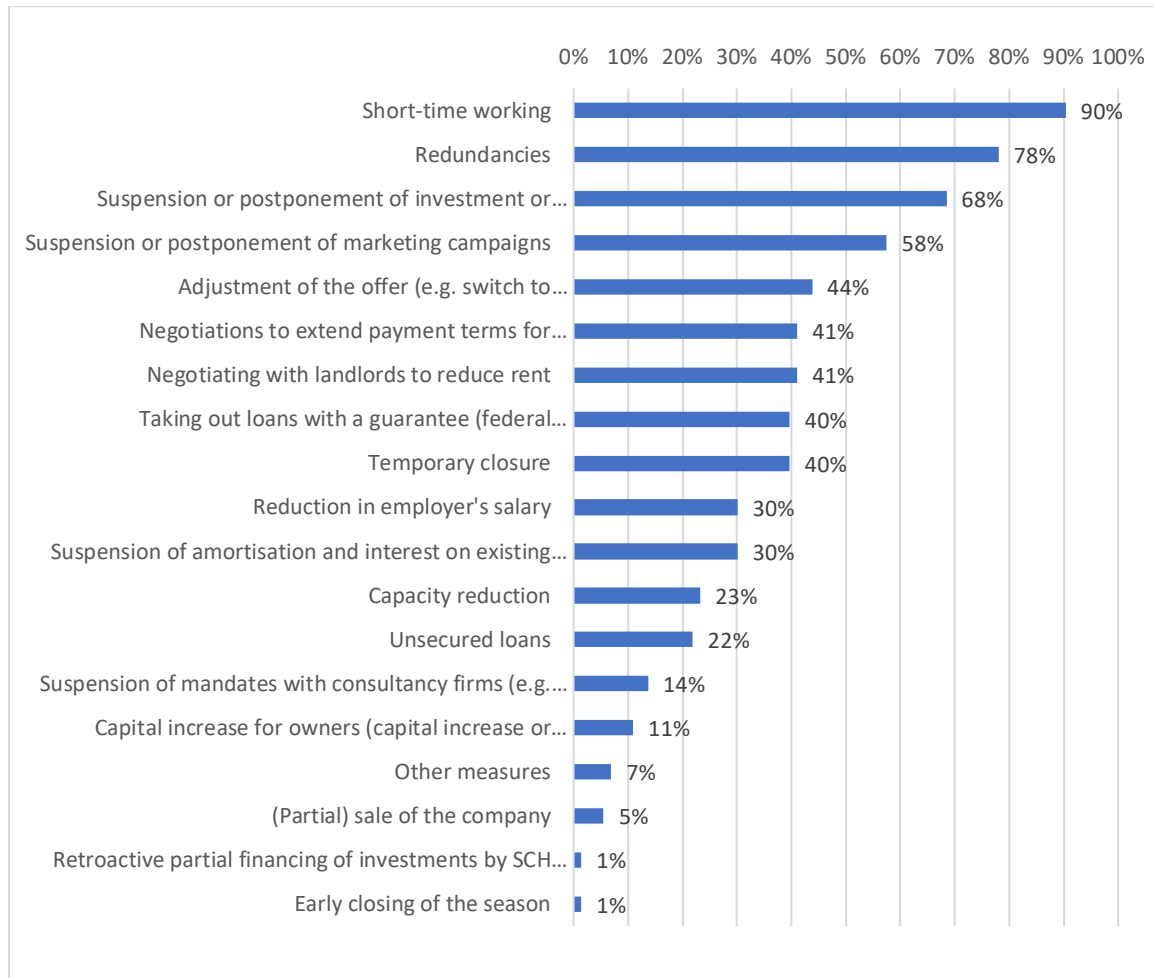
4.1.2 Hotel Crisis Management: Key Measures in 2021

In 2021, 78% of hotels relied primarily on partial unemployment (90%) to cope with the ongoing impact of the pandemic - up from 30% in April 2020 and consistent with the previous year's approach. Financial commitments were also reduced, with 68% postponing investments or maintenance

Other key measures included pausing marketing campaigns (58%) and adjusting services - such as shifting to delivery or takeaway (44%). Many hotels negotiated extended payment deadlines (41%) or rental reductions (41%), while 40% took guaranteed loans under the federal emergency aid program or temporarily closed.

These figures underscore both the severity of the crisis and the range of strategies hotels employed to navigate it.

Figure 1: What measures have you taken or do you plan to take to reduce your costs and minimize the impact of the crisis on your business? (n=73)



4.1.3 Adaptive Strategies in the Hotel Industry: Navigating Post-Crisis

To confront the pandemic, 79% of hotels streamlined internal operations. Nearly half (46%) adopted new digital tools, reflecting a broader shift toward a tech-driven industry. Cost-saving collaborations were pursued by 45%, while 44% launched or planned to launch their own products. Additionally, 32% turned to partner-developed offerings, combining self-reliance with collaboration. Just 4% adopted other measures, underscoring the dominance of these core strategies.

4.1.4 Future Hotel Strategies and Innovations

Hoteliers are adapting to a shifting landscape by focusing on customer experience and business model innovation. A strong majority (82%) see potential for innovation in guest experience, with

80% considering new target audiences - such as family tourism - and 64% exploring city-based services like guided tours.

Business model innovation is a priority for 70%, with strategies including long stays (52%) and Airbnb-style short- to medium-term rentals (42%). Asset management innovation interests 23%, notably in revenue streams like parking (49%). Owner-managed hotels slightly favor these strategies, scoring 3 out of 5, versus 2.6 for landlords.

Overall, future hotel strategy centers on elevating the customer experience and rethinking traditional models.

4.2 Synthesis of the World Café Results

This sub-section examines crisis management in the Swiss hotel industry, drawing on insights from our World Café discussions during the COVID-19 pandemic. It highlights the roles of HR, ad-hoc strategies, team collaboration, and financial management, while also addressing innovative approaches such as employee empowerment, business model reevaluation, technology adoption, and sustainability.

4.2.1 Crisis Management in the hotel industry: successes and failures

HR's Role in Crisis Management

HR focused on listening, supporting, and building trust with employees - simple yet effective strategies during lockdowns. To counter talent loss, managers emphasized team strength and flexible staffing. Some had to outsource tasks or dismiss disruptive staff. The potential of employing refugees was also discussed, both as a labor solution and a means of integration.

Turning Crisis into Opportunity

The crisis opened new opportunities: hotel acquisitions, renovation work during closures, and strategic realignment. Shifting guest and staff habits forced hotels to embrace a “new normal,” requiring improvisation, resilience, and operational change.

Cross-Department Collaboration

Agile crisis response was fueled by collaboration across departments. Participants stressed maintaining this synergy instead of returning to siloed operations.

Managing Costs and Liquidity

Hotels had to closely monitor cash flow, cut costs, and build liquidity to survive an uncertain future. Some even created reserves now seen as investments for recovery.

4.2.2 What worked and what needs to be improved in the role of institutions and the government during a crisis

Important Institutions

Central and local governments, umbrella associations, and tourism stakeholders played critical roles during the crisis - especially in coordinating information. Hoteliers praised the State and professional associations for their responsiveness (e.g., voucher systems), while noting that hotel and tourism schools supported recovery with practical tools and training.

A spirit of solidarity emerged: hotels began seeing one another as colleagues rather than competitors, fostering collaboration and shared solutions. However, tourist offices were viewed as passive, missing an opportunity to contribute meaningfully.

A Missing Meta-Crisis Approach

Participants agreed that a coordinated, national crisis mindset is still lacking. While federal authorities were seen as supportive, municipalities were less engaged - particularly around subsidies. Participants called for legislation to encourage risk-sharing and for predefined crisis scenarios with support measures. The ARH and SECO were cited as models for future preparedness, especially through continued development of tools like vouchers and guest cards, and guidelines for staff training in crisis situations.

Impartiality Issues

Stakeholders like OTAs, travel agents, and review platforms were seen as favoring customers over hotels during the crisis. Hoteliers urged these actors to adopt a more balanced stance, pledging to collaborate more closely in return to better anticipate and manage future disruptions.

Role of the Hospitality Lobby

Industry advocacy groups were praised for their promotional efforts. Moving forward, they should continue to position hospitality as a serious, talent-driven industry. These groups are expected to provide strategic guidance and coordinate more effectively in future crises - promoting transparency, sharing information, and enabling stronger collective responses.

4.2.3 Crisis management readiness: looking ahead and adopting innovation strategies

Empowering Employees

Empowering employees means valuing them throughout their journey - from hiring to departure. Hoteliers must adopt flexible recruitment, improve difficult jobs (like housekeeping), and avoid outsourcing where possible. Participants stressed versatility, training, and better working conditions to retain staff and even attract those who left. True teamwork is essential, and knowing employees personally strengthens unity. The idea of "Uberization" was rejected; investment in people remains central to hospitality.

Returning to Core Values

To build resilience, hotels must revisit their core identity and rethink business models, especially by improving stakeholder collaboration. Creating immersive, destination-like experiences - e.g., food events, family activities, or multifunctional spaces - can drive guest loyalty. Strong branding remains key to differentiation.

Technology as Support, Not Substitute

Technology should support - not replace - human service. Big data may improve crisis detection and management through dashboards, while past crisis experience has made hotels leaner and more responsive. Communication is crucial when innovating. Digital tools are vital for segments like business travel and events, but the human touch remains irreplaceable in upscale settings. Despite rising digitalization, in-person meetings and the pre-COVID customer mix are expected to persist.

Sustainability Beyond Marketing

Sustainability must be part of a hotel’s culture, not just a slogan. Prioritizing local suppliers, embracing ‘slow travel,’ and integrating transport options are key steps. Participants emphasized addressing the “sustainability paradox” - welcoming global tourists while minimizing environmental impact - through thoughtful innovation, not retreat.

4.2.4 Conclusion and Transition to Discussion

Table 1 offers a concise overview of crisis management in Swiss hotels, capturing successes, failures, institutional roles, and innovation. The following discussion explores the broader implications of these findings for the industry's future.

Table 1: Summary of the main fieldwork synthesizing key findings

What can be learnt looking forward?			
	<i>What worked?</i>	<i>What didn't work?</i>	<i>Possible future steps</i>
HR's function in crisis management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Listening to employees • Fostering a sense of trust • Developing relationships with employees 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adjusting staffing and logistics due to public health measures was challenging • Outsourcing specific activities and dismissing workers damaged employee morale and the company's reputation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop a crisis management plan • Dedicate resources to help employees cope with stress, anxiety, and trauma • Implement remote working policies
Developing ad-hoc strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The crisis created opportunities for acquisitions and remodeling work • Reevaluating medium- and long-term plans 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adapting to a "new normal" required significant changes in operations • The crisis led to increased competition 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish relationships and communication channels with external stakeholders • Develop a communication plan

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developing improvisational skills and resilience prepared companies for future crises. 	as more companies adapted and innovated.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure sufficient resources and infrastructure to support the crisis mgt plan (e.g., tech, staffing, and funding). • Implement a sustainability plan
Looking for synergies within the hotel across different departments, teams, and functions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collaboration between departments and teams encouraged innovation and led to better solutions. • Cross-department cooperation demolished silos and improved communication and collaboration. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collaboration required significant changes in organizational culture and structure. • Conflicts or disagreements between departments and teams. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Foster a culture of collaboration • Build trust • Develop cross-functional training • Celebrate successes
Management of costs, cash flow, and liquidity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Monitoring cash flow and cutting expenses helped companies weather financial instability. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cutting expenses led to reduced quality or service, damaging the company's reputation. • Accumulating cash reserves limited a company's ability to invest in improvements or growth. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop financial scenarios • Build a cash reserve • Monitor and adjust financial strategies • Think of crisis preparedness as a public good.
Role of institutions and the government during crises	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Professional associations and voucher systems provided struggling businesses with financial support and resources. • Hotel and tourist schools provided management tools and resources to help businesses recover 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of coordination or support from institutions or the government limited businesses' ability to respond effectively to the crisis. • Tourist offices' lack of participation or collaboration limited opportunities to exhibit solidarity and undertake innovation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A meta 'crisis management approach' is still lacking • Communicate potential risks to the public • Promote partnerships with private sector companies, community organizations, and other government agencies

5. Discussion and Recommendations

This section explores crisis management in hotels - covering preparation, response, and recovery - with a focus on HR, ad-hoc strategies, collaboration, financial resilience, and institutional support. Each topic is framed as a research proposal to guide future analysis and strategy.

5.1 HR's function in crisis management

Research proposal: Effective crisis management in hotels requires HR to prioritize employee well-being and trust, achieved through listening, developing relationships, and dedicating resources to cope with stress and trauma.

Discussion: Prioritizing employee well-being, trust, and communication is essential to crisis management in hotels (Ngo et al., 2023; He et al., 2020). HR can build workforce resilience by supporting staff through stress and maintaining strong relationships. However, staffing adjustments and outsourcing can harm morale. Given high turnover in Swiss hotels, sustained investment in employee care, flexible work arrangements, and remote work options will be key to future preparedness.

Managerial Recommendation: Invest in employee well-being, strengthen relationships, and adopt flexible policies to build a resilient workforce.

5.2 Developing ad-hoc strategies

Research Proposal: Effective crisis management in hotels requires ad-hoc strategies that leverage opportunities - such as acquisitions, remodeling, and strategic reevaluation - while strengthening improvisation and resilience.

Discussion: Crises can drive transformation. Hotels that adapt through acquisitions, renovations, and long-term planning gain a competitive edge (Lombardi et al., 2021). Embracing a "new normal" demands operational changes, collaboration with external stakeholders, clear communication, and readiness infrastructure (e.g., tech, staffing, funding). Sustainability should be integrated to support long-term resilience.

Managerial Recommendation: Develop ad-hoc strategies focused on adaptability, stakeholder engagement, communication, resource readiness, and sustainability.

5.3 Looking for synergies within the hotel across different departments, teams, and functions

Research Proposal: Effective crisis management requires hotels to foster synergies across departments, encouraging innovation and breaking down silos.

Discussion: Cross-department collaboration improves communication and drives innovation (Liu-Lastres, 2022; Pascual-Fernández et al., 2021; Hernández-Perlins et al., 2019). Though cultural shifts and conflicts may arise, building trust and offering cross-functional training can strengthen teamwork and sustain innovation.

Managerial Recommendation: Promote interdepartmental collaboration through trust-building, training, and recognition to enhance crisis response and innovation.

5.4 Management of costs, cash flow, and liquidity

Research Proposal: Strong cost, cash-flow, and liquidity management boosts hotel resilience in crises.

Discussion: A balanced financial strategy - monitoring cash flow, building reserves, and cutting costs - helps hotels survive shocks while safeguarding service quality and future growth (Herédia-Colaço et al., 2021; Dube et al., 2021). Crisis readiness should be treated as a public good, aligning short-term stability with long-term sustainability.

Managerial Recommendation: Use scenario planning, maintain liquidity buffers, and adjust financial tactics continually, balancing immediate needs with long-term investment.

5.5 Role of institutions and the government during crises

Research Proposal: Institutional support and government intervention strengthen hotel resilience during crises.

Discussion: Professional associations, voucher systems, and hospitality schools provide vital support in times of crisis (Sanabria-Díaz et al., 2021; Birtch et al., 2021). However, limited coordination and weak engagement from some institutions - especially tourist offices - hinder effective response. A unified meta-crisis strategy, risk communication, and cross-sector partnerships are needed to enhance preparedness.

Managerial Recommendation: Hotels should collaborate with associations, tourist offices, and government bodies, and build industry-wide partnerships to improve crisis readiness.

5.6 Navigating Crisis Management in Swiss Hotels

In conclusion, HR's role in fostering trust and well-being is key to workforce resilience. Swiss hotels should continue prioritizing employee support, flexible work, and balanced crisis strategies to strengthen future adaptability.

6. Developing an AI Framework: Integrating Weak Signals for Enhanced Crisis Management

Swiss hotels are navigating a shift from reactive crisis management to proactive, adaptive strategies. Field insights reveal “weak signals” pointing to the need for flexible work models, employee well-being, financial reserves, and stronger external communication.

Embracing AI for predictive crisis management is no longer optional - it enables early detection and strategic response. However, its integration must be thoughtful and carefully managed.

6.1 Developing an AI Framework for Predictive Crisis Management

The development of an AI framework for predictive crisis management is an intricate process that empowers Swiss hotels to extract valuable insights from weak signals and transform them into actionable strategies. This process unfolds through several steps:

1. Identification of Key Indicators and Early Warning Signs: The journey begins with identifying key indicators and early warning signs of potential crises. These indicators could span changes in customer behaviors, shifts in economic trends, evolving social dynamics, or emerging threats in the external environment.

2. Data Gathering and Preparation: With the indicators identified, the next step is the meticulous gathering of data from diverse sources, encompassing social media, financial records, news reports, and internal systems. This data undergoes rigorous cleaning and preprocessing to ensure its quality and reliability.

3. Feature Selection: The key to the process is the identification of critical features and data points that are most predictive of potential crises. Features may include location, amenities, room rates, seasonality, customer satisfaction metrics, and a myriad of other variables.

4. Model Selection: Swiss hotels must then choose an appropriate deep-learning model that aligns with the specific problem at hand. Options may include Convolutional Neural Networks (CNNs), Recurrent Neural Networks (RNNs), or other deep learning models. These models are rigorously tested using a subset of the data.

5. Hyperparameter Tuning: Fine-tuning the model is essential for optimizing its performance. This involves the adjustment of hyperparameters such as learning rates, batch sizes, and the number of layers, ensuring that the model performs optimally.

6. Deployment: With a well-trained and validated model, the final step is its deployment in a production environment. Here, it generates predictions on new data, a process that requires continuous monitoring and periodic retraining to keep the model effective and accurate.

AI offers powerful tools for crisis management but has limits, including potential bias and imperfect predictions. Swiss hotels should combine AI with human expertise, involving crisis and ethics specialists to guide implementation.

Informed by weak signals, AI enables agile responses to polycrises. When integrated wisely, it becomes a vital asset for long-term resilience and sustainability.

7. Conclusion

In an era marked by unprecedented challenges, the COVID-19 pandemic has tested the hospitality industry, exposing both its vulnerabilities and strengths. Yet these trials have provided valuable insights that can help reshape crisis management and resilience strategies for years to come. As we conclude this exploration of Swiss hotels and their path to resilience, several key lessons and takeaways emerge.

At the heart of this transformation is the development of comprehensive crisis management plans. Swiss hotels have come to recognize that preparedness is the first line of defense - whether facing pandemics, natural disasters, or other disruptions. These plans not only guide actions in times of adversity but also lay the groundwork for proactive, future-oriented responses.

A central lesson is the critical importance of investing in employee well-being. Swiss hotels understand that resilient organizations are built on resilient individuals. Supporting mental health and fostering motivation are not merely CSR initiatives - they are essential to crisis readiness. A healthy, well-supported workforce is better equipped to adapt and recover.

Collaboration and communication have also proven vital. Crisis management is not a solitary task -it thrives on synergy across departments and free-flowing information. Fieldwork findings highlight the need for ad-hoc strategies, external communication channels, and financial reserves as part of proactive risk management.

The value of strong relationships with external stakeholders and government institutions has also become clear. Partnerships with professional associations, tourist offices, and public agencies can serve as lifelines during crises, offering critical support and resources.

Last, but not least, while the pandemic posed major challenges, it also offered essential lessons for the future. By learning from experience, embracing collaborative and adaptive strategies, and investing in people, Swiss hotels can strengthen their crisis resilience and thrive in the face of future uncertainty.

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