

A WHITE PAPER FROM HSMAI FOUNDATION

---

# HOTEL HR RESPONSES TO THE PANDEMIC

*Insights and thought leadership from global hospitality  
human resources executives.*



# Hotel HR Responses to the Pandemic

By J. Bruce Tracey

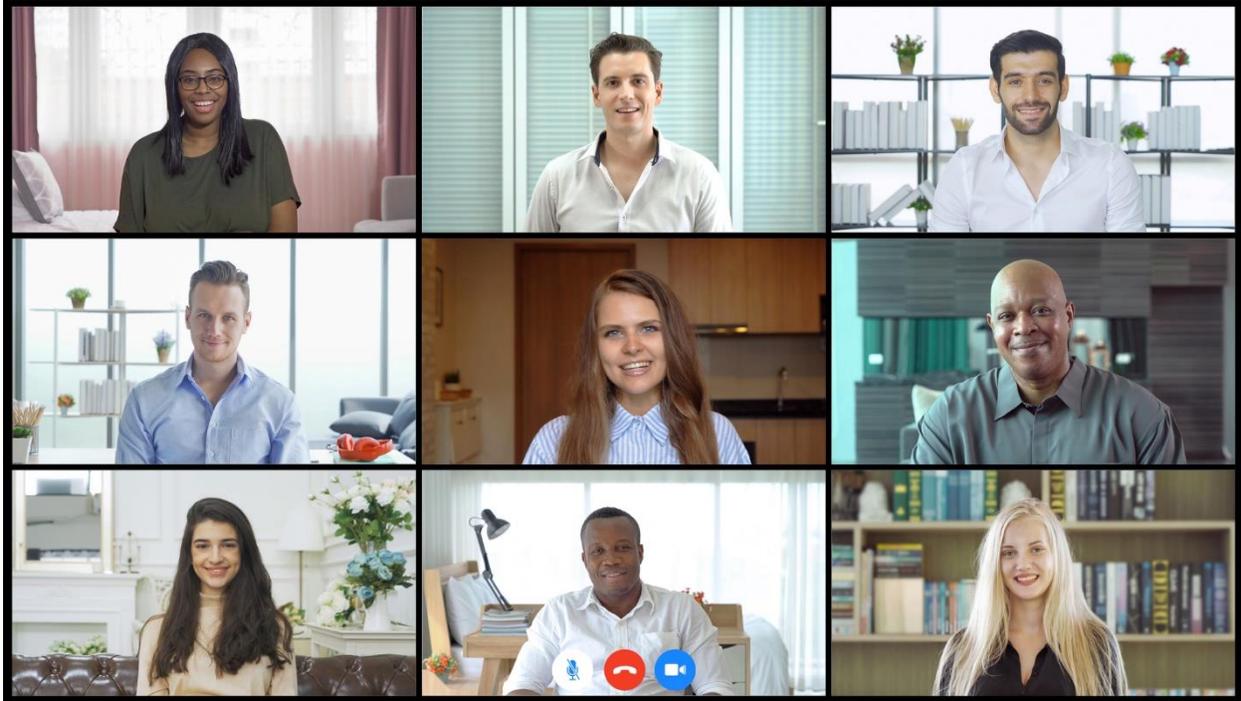
---

*Insights and thought leadership from global hospitality human resources executives.*

**W**hile 2020 was a difficult year for the hospitality industry, one of the bright spots was the manner in which human resources (HR) professionals responded to the many unanticipated and still-evolving challenges associated with the pandemic. During a series of executive roundtables that the HSMAI Foundation organized in the Americas, Europe, the Middle East, and Asia Pacific, hotel HR leaders shared the strategies and practices they have implemented in response to the talent crisis that COVID-19 has triggered throughout the industry. (See “Roundtables Around the World,” p. 7.) While their initial efforts centered on retrenchment and building resilience, gradually they shifted to identifying new solutions for attracting, developing, and retaining talent.

## **INITIAL RESPONSE: Doing More With Less**

When governments shut down businesses to curb the virus, the main priority for hotel companies was cost reduction. Layoffs and furloughs were imminent, and HR professionals gave careful consideration to managing the process as effectively as possible. For companies that were in a strong financial position, staffing levels remained fairly constant, with no substantive adjustments to functional expenses (e.g., training, benefits, etc.). In these cases, employers were able to reinforce their commitment to their teams directly and provide a critical source of support and certainty at an extremely uncertain time. Many other employers, however, weren't so lucky and were forced to make



huge cuts quickly. Operational positions took the biggest hit, but losses in sales, marketing, and revenue positions were also quite salient.

**Staff reductions:** In addition to focusing on legal and regulatory compliance, HR professionals spent considerable time developing an open and supportive process for implementing staff reductions. For example, many companies adopted more frequent and inclusive communication strategies, so separation decisions could be shared in a timely and personally direct manner. “No one wants to wonder if they are going to be

furloughed,” one HSMIA Foundation roundtable participant noted, “so we were front and center with everyone we had to let go.”

In addition, many companies provided assistance to help departing employees access unemployment benefits, and in some cases HR professionals were able to lobby owners to extend medical benefits and provide continued access to resources such as learning and development programs for several weeks or even months after separation. These and related efforts went a long way to maintaining and even building a stronger employer image and left a

markedly positive impact on departing employees. This was a critical outcome — all of the HR professionals who participated in the roundtables expressed a clear preference to rehire former employees as quickly as demand would allow, so ensuring an empathetic and humanistic approach to making difficult employment decisions was of paramount importance.

**Remaining employees:** For those hospitality professionals who were still employed, team morale and well-being

were top priorities. This meant that additional and even more intensive communication efforts were needed to ensure employees were aware of the resources and support that was available to them, as well as keeping everyone informed about operational and strategic priorities that were constantly evolving.

Those in administrative and support functions, including HR, marketing, sales, and revenue, saw their jobs go online and transitioned — sometimes roughly — to working from home.

While there were some noticeable benefits from virtual meetings and

online engagement, including more direct and frequent communication among and across hierarchical and functional roles, the negative side effects associated with “Zoom

---

**“No one wants to wonder if they are going to be furloughed, so we were front and center with everyone we had to let go.”**

---

fatigue” and a blurred distinction between work and home took a big toll on work-life balance. Most roundtable participants expressed significant concerns about employee burnout, stress, and mental health. Those in operational roles were similarly situated, due in large part to the elevated



responsibilities associated with safety, sanitation, social distancing, and related requirements, as well as expanded multifunctional job duties that became grounded within an increasing “do more with less” reality.

## **THE SECOND PHASE: From Survival to Resilience**

When it became clear that the competitive landscape would remain fluid and that recovery would be protracted, HR professionals moved from survival to resilience. Flexibility and agility

became the buzzwords that guided decision-making and spurred additional changes throughout the downturn.

### **Expanding scopes of work:**

Typically narrow job descriptions become much more multifunctional, which in turn meant that training and development took on an increasingly significant role. In addition to developing a heightened emphasis on safety and cleanliness, some hotel companies established partnerships with government and educational institutions such as Johns Hopkins University’s

Blomberg School of Public Health to develop programming for addressing numerous operational and strategic learning needs — from conducting contact tracing and supporting the needs of first-responders, to creating new employee assistance and wellness programs designed to destigmatize the seriousness

of mental health problems and increase participation rates. These types of enhancements were instrumental in ensuring front-line staff were clear and confident in executing their

essential-role responsibilities, and provided an important safety net to better manage the competing demands associated with work and personal life.

**Shifting to virtual:** Hotel HR professionals continued to leverage technology to further enhance

employee engagement and performance. Some organized virtual lunches, for example, to facilitate employee connections across geographic and functional boundaries. In addition, the speed of decision-making accelerated as staff learned how to utilize virtual platforms to facilitate more

effective communication. As a result, employees become more responsive to each other, and their more frequent and intensive interactions helped facilitate

---

**Employees became more responsive to each other, and their interactions helped facilitate creative solutions to longstanding problems.**

---

creative solutions to longstanding operational problems such as responsiveness to guest inquiries. Moreover, hotels in some global regions began to see increases in demand, which provided some employment recovery, including in sales, marketing, and revenue roles, and created a sense of optimism

that was especially important as restrictions and overall reductions in demand dragged on.

## WHAT'S COMES NEXT: The Future of Work

As these new realities began to take shape, HSMIAI Foundation roundtable participants expressed the need to continue serving as change agents — and also described a growing pivot toward innovation. For example, many reported substantive functional restructuring efforts, with some hotel companies moving quickly to self-service HR systems. “Our field HR teams have been maxed out and, in some cases, eliminated altogether,” one HR executive said. As result, many of the company’s HR responsibilities were shifted to operational managers, so “everybody will be able to do their HR-related work from their phones.”

**The upside of automation:** As reporting relationships were streamlined and tech-enabled procedures such as contactless check-in and checkout were implemented, several roundtable

## Roundtables Around the World

In Q3 and Q4 2020, the HSMIAI Foundation partnered with HSMIAI regions around the world on a series of Executive Roundtable programs for hotel chief human resources officers, who shared the insights and thought leadership included in this white paper. Each event was also written up in a separate article:

**AMERICAS** | July 14, 2020 — [ARTICLE LINK](#)

**ASIA PACIFIC** | Aug. 19, 2020 — [ARTICLE LINK](#)

**EUROPE** | Sept. 16, 2020 — [ARTICLE LINK](#)

**AMERICAS** | Oct. 15, 2020 — [ARTICLE LINK](#)

**MIDDLE EAST** | Oct. 21, 2020 — [ARTICLE LINK](#)

participants wondered about the future of work, including becoming more purposeful about designing jobs and workspaces. “We’re always going to be a people-centric business,” one HR executive said, “but that doesn’t mean we can’t be open to doing things differently.”

On the positive side, the move to automated systems means that operational teams will have increased opportunities to develop more value-adding services that are designed to enhance the guest experience. In

addition, the creative use of resources has led to “innovation in efficiencies that we never thought possible,” according to one HSMAI Foundation roundtable participant, and a sense of renewed purpose to reimagine the workplace of the future.

**The evolution of hospitality:** As new work procedures and technologies have been adopted, it is expected that the pace of decision making and problem solving will continue to accelerate and become more complex. Thus, hotel HR executives anticipate that there will be a salient shift in the capability requirements for many operational

and corporate roles, and that many traditional hospitality jobs will disappear. This means that careful and purposeful consideration will be needed to determine which tasks and

responsibilities will be performed by technology and which will be performed by people. Moreover, several roundtable participants expressed strong concerns about the hospitality industry’s ability to attract the new talent that will be needed as competitive conditions

---

**“We’re always going to be a people-centric business, but that doesn’t mean we can’t be open to doing things differently.”**

---

improve; indeed, there is worrisome evidence that people are leaving the industry to find more secure work opportunities.

But despite the lingering ambiguity around recovery, most of the hotel HR professionals who participated in the HSMAI Foundational roundtables remain optimistic

about the future. There was consensus that the changes made in response to the pandemic will stimulate companies to develop more attractive, enriching, and sustainable employment opportunities, and that the hospitality industry as a whole will emerge as a more compelling and professionalized place to work. ■

---

*J. Bruce Tracey is the Kenneth and Marjorie Blanchard Professor of Human Resource Management at Cornell University's School of Hotel Administration and editor of Cornell Hospitality Quarterly.*

**ABOUT HSMAI** | Hospitality Sales & Marketing Association International (HSMAI) is the hospitality industry's leading advocate for intelligent, sustainable hotel revenue growth. HSMAI provides hotel professionals and their partners with tools, insights, and expertise to fuel sales, inspire marketing, and optimize revenue through programs such as HSMAI ROC, Marketing Strategy Conference, Sales Leader Forum, and Adrian Awards. HSMAI offers organizational and individual membership, with more than 7,000 members in four global regions – the Americas, Asia Pacific, Europe, and the Middle East. — [hsmi.org](https://hsmi.org)

**ABOUT HSMAI FOUNDATION** | The HSMAI Foundation is a 501(c)3 organization established in 1983 to serve as the research and educational arm of Hospitality Sales & Marketing Association International. Based in Mclean, Virginia, with an extensive knowledge base and connections across the globe, the Foundation's mission is to elevate the overall caliber and performance of sales, marketing, and revenue optimization professionals in the global hospitality industry by driving initiatives that will attract new talent, develop emerging talent, and engage existing talent. — [foundation.hsmi.org](https://foundation.hsmi.org)

© 2021 HSMAI Foundation