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Lessons I Learned During the Pandemic

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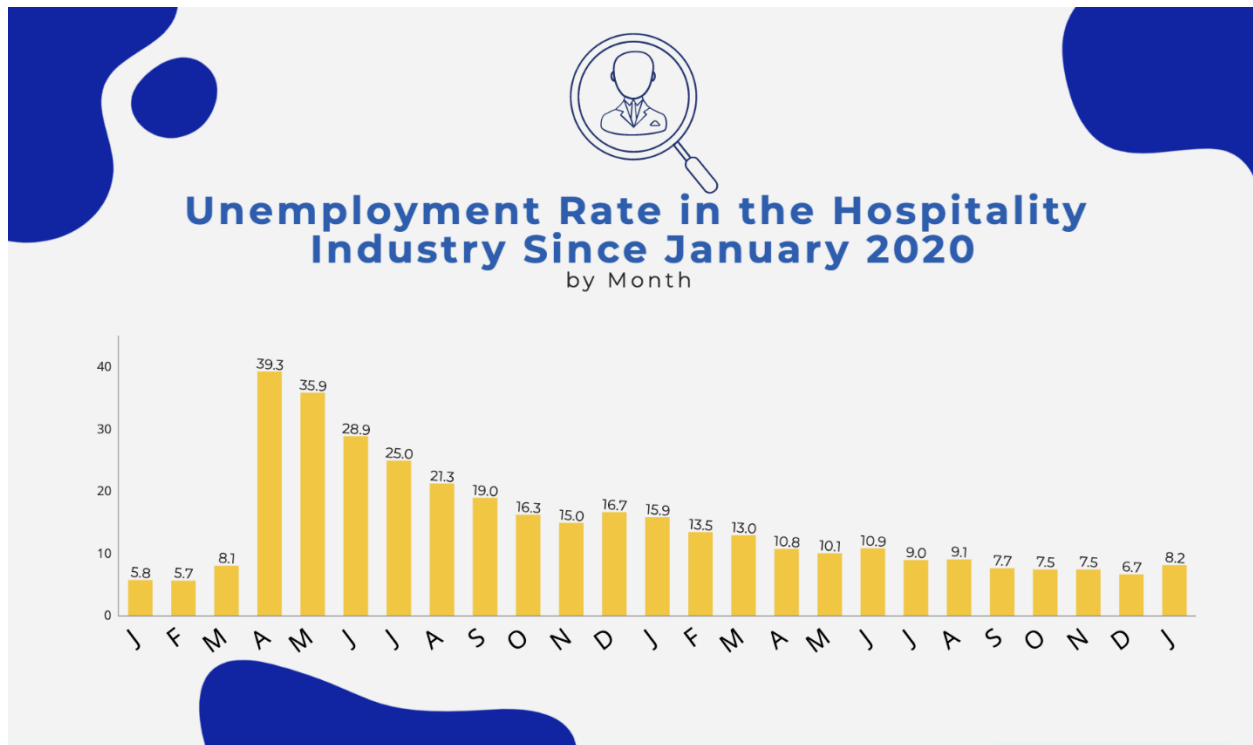
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Lessons I Learned During the Pandemic



In March of 2020, the hotel where I work – the longest continuously operating hotel in the United States – closed due to the Covid-19 pandemic. As an Area Director of Human Resources before the pandemic, I provided support to about 10 hotels from New Hampshire to the District of Columbia. Each hotel had its own HR team varying in size, totaling about 30 people working in HR positions. As of April 1, 2020, six remained. As a result, the definition of "Area" changed.

During this unprecedented time, I rotated between three properties and had one other full-time employee working at our nearby resort. My job as Area Director changed from hotel site visits, investigating issues, college recruiting, and supporting teams, to doing the hands-on basics, which I had not done for decades. General Managers called for help with HRIS questions, furlough and resignation processing, and reactivation of employees. Employees and their spouses phoned, emailed or stopped by closed hotels with questions. Legally worded WARN act letters were sent out to many with my signature. I responded to many unemployment claims daily.



Covid brought us into isolated work environments; there were no teams left to speak of. Something I looked forward to was sending employees to our company's resorts that remained busy. If you wanted to work at a warm-weather resort, we had a job for you and a plane ticket to get you there. I became a travel agent. I had to change gears quickly, assisting an employee with a stalled unemployment claim one moment, then speaking to a General Manager at an out-of-state property regarding a completely different problem. I connected directly with associates in ways I had not for years. To deal with an uncertain future, I continued to put one step in front of the other. Mistakes were made, and I learned as I went along, just like everyone else. That said, my "gear-switching" abilities improved. I learned I could work on more strategic problems (such as how to manage with a lack of foreign workers) and work on more individual problems (such as creating reports to determine how much vacation we owed to an associate). Prior to the pandemic, someone else did the vacation research.

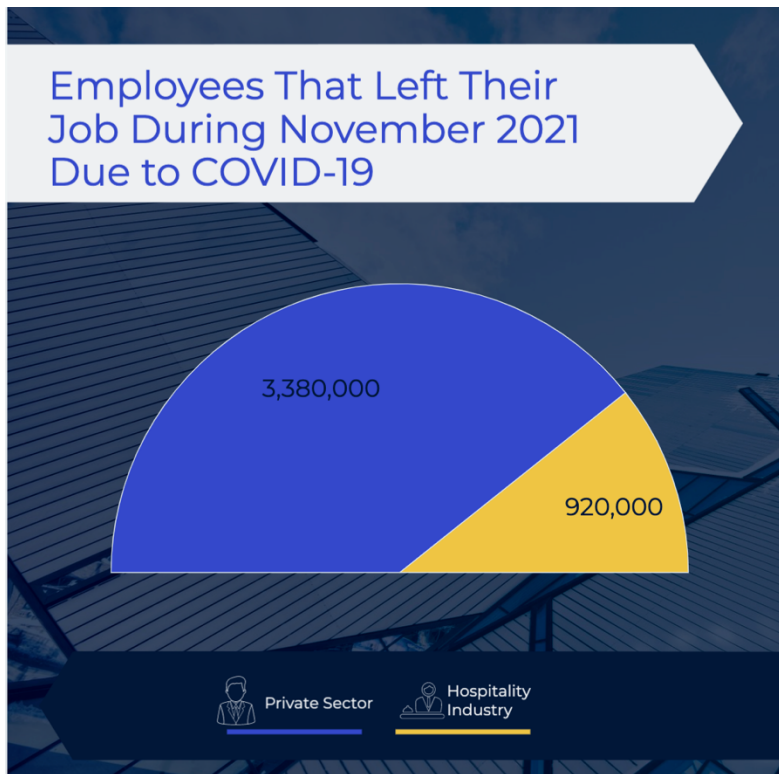
The Return to the Office

As Covid ebbed, I felt about a third of our 300 or so associates did not want to return to work in the hotel right away. When given a chance, people wanted to wait it out and see before committing to return (a combination of legitimate health concerns or doing better staying at home due to stimulus money.) One-third wanted to work and return to life as

they knew it before the pandemic. Finally, the last third did not want to stay in the industry at all. To this day, these numbers are still sorting out as business demand changes and more people choose to return, retire or resign.

Therein lies the issue: according to the latest statistics, 7% of people who worked in hospitality left the industry during the pandemic, and an additional 9% are approaching retirement age within the next 5 years (Romeo, 2022). Prior to Covid-19 at our hotel alone, we had between 325 and 350 employees, made up in part by a group of 30 individuals who were in the “30+ club,” having worked for the hotel for thirty years or more, all of whom will be retiring within the next few years. This situation will not only be a staffing issue but also a challenge from a cultural knowledge perspective. The aging of the professional hospitality workforce who performed physically demanding jobs year after year (room attendants in Housekeeping, restaurant and banquet servers, cooks, bartenders, etc.) is going to compound “the great resignation” with a great retirement, leaving the rest of the industry behind to pick up the pieces of a much damaged but very important industry.

When looking at these statistics, we have to ask ourselves who is going to want to come back? According to Build Remote, three-fifth of workers, when surveyed, stated that they wanted to remain virtual even after the pandemic. Not only do employees see the benefits, but so do employers. The idea lowers costs, increases the talent pool, flexibility, and employee retention. Unfortunately, it is not as plausible in a hands-on environment such as in the hospitality industry. Additionally, one-third of hospitality employees are switching industries for higher benefits, higher pay, and a change of pace in the environment due to this industry's intensity. According to the Bureau of Labor, 62 million hospitality jobs were lost worldwide due to Covid-19. Just in November 2021, 920,000 hospitality industry jobs were lost in comparison to the 4.3 million jobs lost in all private sectors (including hospitality) in that same month.



Hospitality in the Virtual World

Can "virtual work" work for hospitality? During the pandemic, my company modernized. A cash-counting machine can replace the job of a General Cashier, income auditors were replaced by technology, and payroll functions such as vacation requests and their approvals or denials became automated. Yet, as mentioned, there was much to be done, even in a closed hotel, especially in Human Resources. It was a good reminder for me: as long as people are working in a hotel or a resort, there will be a need for Human Resources to service them. While recruitment is now outsourced and centralized, and salespeople work remotely more than before, job applicants should see the facility or the locale where they will work and live before taking a job; someone must arrange and host their visits. Ultimately, it does not seem a total virtual work environment will ever be viable at the individual hotel level. Modernization and job redesign will not solve recruiting challenges.

Consider resorts for a moment: resorts in my company reopened reasonably early during the pandemic. You can play golf six feet away from someone. You can ride a ski lift by yourself. With my hotel in Boston closed, I undertook a temporary assignment at our nearby year-round resort. The resort historically operated with 1100 employees for the winter season, of which about 150 were visa holders. During the pandemic, foreign

workers were unavailable. We hired around 35 college students who took classes virtually, worked for us as needed, and enjoyed the perks of a season pass, free housing, and free meals in the resort's employee cafeteria. We transferred in approximately 65 company employees furloughed from closed company hotels. Ultimately, we could fill just about all the positions needed for the season. Due to the increased business, our revenue was one of the highest we have seen in winter month history and life was starting to return to normalcy. With that being said, resorts are labor-intensive and require in-person work to service the guests.

Looking ahead, Covid-19 is here to stay in one form or another. Here are some recommendations the industry can do to deal with this challenge:

1. **Increasing Employee Benefits:** to make our business more attractive, so people want to work in this industry at the start of their careers. Higher pay and better benefits are part of the solution. Travel benefits, perhaps in concert with airline partners, significant educational assistance, and college loan contributions of some kind are possible routes. These employee benefits can help with retention, which is a challenge as well.
2. **Easing Foreign Labor Restrictions and Immigration Reform:** to make it easier for foreign workers to work in hospitality jobs. More visas for foreign workers should be made available for the industry.
3. **Developing Artificial Intelligence:** to replace some functions, using automation and robotics, to allow people to do other tasks. There may be a future world where robots deliver room service, extra blankets, and pillows, and expand their check-in/check-out capacities. HR leaders can be part of the job redesign process. We must advocate for maintaining human interaction that guests want, not eliminating people from the equation. Yet, there is a greater need in the future for IT-savvy leaders in hospitality.
4. **Creating Fun Diversions for Hotel and Resort Staff:** to engage and retain staff, particularly in remote locations for off-duty times. One belief of mine that became more prominent for me during the pandemic: the relationships between leaders and their teams make or break the team. As HR leaders, we must encourage fellow leaders to know our employees as individuals, meet their needs whenever possible, and make sure all our operations employees do the same. We must transition our hiring managers from a strict scheduling process to a creative one with a fun management style embedded with ongoing training in order to create work-life balance and minimize any perceptions of inequality.

Hiring and Developing Talent

For the future, the hospitality business is still a people business, and it requires people to make it run. The "Great Resignation," the upcoming rush of retirements, and the hesitation of workers to return to the industry pose significant challenges. Creative recruitment, better compensation and perks, and technology will help address these challenges. We must make sure we are bringing in enough people so we will be able to generate employees ready for advancement. My HR team contained four employees prior to Covid-19 but now stands at two due to the lack of talent to promote as many jobs in HR are transitioning to other positions. My company, I suspect, is not alone in facing the problem of less internal bench strength to draw from. If there is only one person in a department, there is nobody to move up if they quit, so we start from zero. Therefore, we need more "bench strength." This is sometimes referred to as "growing your own tomatoes," and it's more important now than before Covid for our industry.

Now more than ever, it is important to reinvent the systems and processes in the hospitality industry into a stronger and more current program to keep our industry one that creates intangible experiences for communities and individuals around the world while still maintaining safety protocols. The next generation of HR leaders will need to be hands-on, strategic, avocational, energetic, and enthusiastic to get us to where we need to go.

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