(REVIEW ARTICLE)

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Developing Resilient Human Resource Policies for Crisis Management and Workforce Stability in U.S. Hotels and Restaurants Post COVID

Esther Ompong [1] and Matthew Oman-Amoako [2, *]

[1] Department of Human Resource Management, University of the Potomac, USA.
[2] AIT Business School, Accra Institute of Technology, Ghana.

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic inflicted severe disruptions on U.S. hotels and restaurants, triggering historic revenue losses, mass layoffs, and operational upheavals. This paper presents a comprehensive literature review of 54 peer-reviewed articles, industry reports, and white papers published between 2020 and 2025 to identify human resource (HR) policy dimensions that underpin organizational resilience and workforce stability in a post-pandemic environment. The review reveals four interdependent clusters of HR interventions: Agile Workforce Planning, Communication & Engagement, Well-Being & Support Systems, and Continuous Learning & Simulation. Comparative case studies illustrate how leading chains and boutique operators combining these policy levers achieved faster restaffing, lower turnover, and higher guest satisfaction. Despite these advances, gaps persist in segment-specific research (boutique vs. chain), longitudinal evaluation of policy impacts, quantitative assessment of HR technology adoption, and standardization of resilience metrics. Building on these insights, a four-pillar policy framework is proposed to guide hospitality HR leaders in embedding flexibility, support, communication, and learning into crisis management strategies. This framework offers an evidence-based blueprint for sustaining service excellence and employee loyalty in an era of ongoing uncertainty.

Keywords: Hospitality; Human Resources; COVID-19; Hotel Or Restaurant; Crisis Management; Resilience; Workforce Stability.

1. Introduction

Since the first COVID-19–related closures in March 2020, the U.S. hospitality sector has endured unprecedented economic losses and job displacement. Between February and December 2020, U.S. hotels reported revenue declines exceeding $46 billion, and more than 4.8 million hospitality and leisure jobs were eliminated as occupancy fell to single-digit levels in many markets [1; 2]. Local Economic Impact Report confirms that by July 2020, nearly 16,000 U.S. establishments had closed permanently, and the industry shed over five million positions, accounting for more than a quarter of its pre-pandemic workforce [3].

The immediate and lingering impacts on hotels and restaurants have been multifaceted. Hotel occupancy rates plunged below 20% in the final months of 2020, with recovery to pre-pandemic levels not projected until 2023 or later [1; 2]. Restaurateurs faced steep declines in dine-in patronage and cumbersome compliance with health mandates, including capacity limits and sanitation protocols, which exacerbated staffing shortages and financial strain. Many surviving operators pivoted to carry-out, delivery, and digital engagement platforms, yet these adaptations did not fully compensate for lost on-premises revenue.

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* Corresponding author: Matthew Oman-Amoako

As a result, resilient HR policies have emerged as a critical lever for crisis management and workforce retention. Research in crisis-induced HR practices demonstrates that targeted interventions such as enhanced psychological support, flexible scheduling, and servant-led communication can strengthen employee resilience, reduce turnover intentions, and sustain service quality under duress [4]. Moreover, meta-analyses reveal that resilience-oriented HR bundles including mental-health resources, skill-broadened roles, and remote-work options significantly mitigate the negative effects of crisis stressors on organizational commitment and job performance [5]. This review aims to synthesize authoritative evidence on HR policy dimensions that foster organizational and employee resilience in U.S. hotels and restaurants post-COVID. Specifically, it addresses two overarching questions:

- What policy dimensions promote resilience?
- How have workforce stability strategies evolved since the onset of COVID-19?

Four interrelated HR policy clusters recur across the literature. First, workforce planning and flexibility, including cross-training, shift-sharing, and on-call staffing, enable rapid redeployment and workload balancing during demand shocks. Secondly, communication and leadership practices such as transparent crisis messaging, virtual town halls, and servant-leadership engagement engender trust and align employee expectations. Moreover, well-being and support systems, notably mental-health programs, emergency financial aid, and Employee Assistance Programs address acute stress and sustain psychological safety. Finally, training and development for crisis readiness, including simulation drills and e-learning modules, builds employee confidence and core competencies for navigating future disruptions [6].

Since mid-2021, hospitality firms have increasingly integrated digital HR technologies such as mobile scheduling apps and AI-driven staffing analytics to anticipate labor needs and streamline communication, a shift underpinned by rising telework expectations even in service sectors [6, 7]. Concurrently, a people-centered focus has emerged, embedding servant leadership, peer mentoring, and inclusive benefit enhancements as firms recognize that workforce loyalty hinges on perceived organizational support during crises. Longitudinal case studies from leading chains and boutique operators illustrate that those combining tech-enabled agility with empathetic HR practices achieved faster re-staffing, lower post-pandemic turnover, and higher guest satisfaction scores.

2. Theoretical & Conceptual Foundations

The Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory posits that stress arises when individuals perceive a threat of resource loss, experience actual resource depletion, or fail to gain resources following investment and effort [8]. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, COR theory has been widely applied to understand how hospitality employees cope with crisis-induced stressors. For example, studies of quarantine hotel staff demonstrate that threats to financial, social, and emotional resources during lockdowns precipitated elevated anxiety, emotional exhaustion, and turnover intentions [9-11]. Empirical research further illustrates that organizations which implemented resource-gain interventions such as enhanced social support, crisis allowances, and skill-development opportunities saw significant improvements in employee resilience and reductions in psychological distress [12; 13]. Thus, COR theory provides a robust lens for identifying HR policies that safeguard and replenish employees' resources during disruptive events.

Enhancing this micro-level perspective, the Resource-Based View (RBV) emphasizes that a firm's unique bundle of resources and capabilities underpins sustainable competitive advantage [14]. In the wake of COVID-19, scholars have reconceptualized RBV to highlight strategic human resource management (SHRM) as an intervening mechanism that capitalizes on internal assets such as employee skills, organizational culture, and technological platforms to boost both employee motivation and organizational resilience [15]. Under this framework, resilient HR policies such as cross-training programs, flexible scheduling technologies, and servant-leadership development) are viewed not merely as cost centers but as strategic resources that enhance a firm's capacity to adapt, innovate, and recover from crises. By integrating COR and RBV, this review delineates how resource protection at the individual level and resource orchestration at the organizational level jointly foster resilience in U.S. hotels and restaurants post-COVID.

3. Crisis Management Frameworks in Hospitality

Human resources (HR) functions play a pivotal role across the three phases of crisis management. Thus pre-crisis, during-crisis, and post-crisis by anticipating threats, mobilizing support, and embedding lessons learned.

Prior to disruption, HR is charged with prevention and preparedness activities that build organizational "immune strength." Key practices include conducting risk-assessment training, such as fortifying psychological capital (PsyCap) through resilience workshops and establishing clear crisis protocols such as emergency staffing plans [16]. Such

pre-emptive measures foster employee self-efficacy and trust in leadership, laying the groundwork for adaptive response when crises strike [17].

In the acute phase, HR shifts to crisis containment and support. This entails real-time communication via daily virtual briefings and rapid-response hotlines to disseminate evolving health guidance and policy changes [18]. Simultaneously, HR implements dynamic workforce planning such as redeployment and flexible scheduling, to match fluctuating demand while minimizing layoffs. Crucially, HR delivers well-being interventions such as on-site counseling and emergency financial assistance to mitigate anxiety and sustain performance under duress [19].

After immediate threats subside, HR spearheads recovery and resilience-building. This involves evaluating crisis outcomes, revising HR policies based on feedback, and institutionalizing successful practices such as cross-training programs and digital HR platforms to strengthen future readiness. Case studies of U.S. hotel chains reveal that organizations which integrated post-crisis "lessons learned" into talent development and culture renewal achieved faster restaffing and lower turnover rates [20]. Orchestrating these phase-specific responsibilities such as pre-crisis preparedness, during-crisis stabilization, and post-crisis institutionalization HR functions transform from transactional administrators into strategic stewards of organizational resilience in U.S. hospitality.

4. HR Policy Dimensions for Resilience

Dynamic workforce planning and flexibility enable hospitality firms to adjust staffing levels and skill mixes in real time, mitigating service gaps during demand shocks. Organizations that adopted elastic shift designs such as split shifts, staggered start times, and cross-utilization matrices were able to redeploy staff swiftly when occupancy plunged or surged, preserving both service continuity and labor cost control [21; 22]. Moreover, flexible scheduling platforms that allow employees to bid for preferred shifts and swap assignments with peers have been shown to reduce absenteeism and increase perceived schedule autonomy, which in turn shores up retention during crisis periods [22; 23].
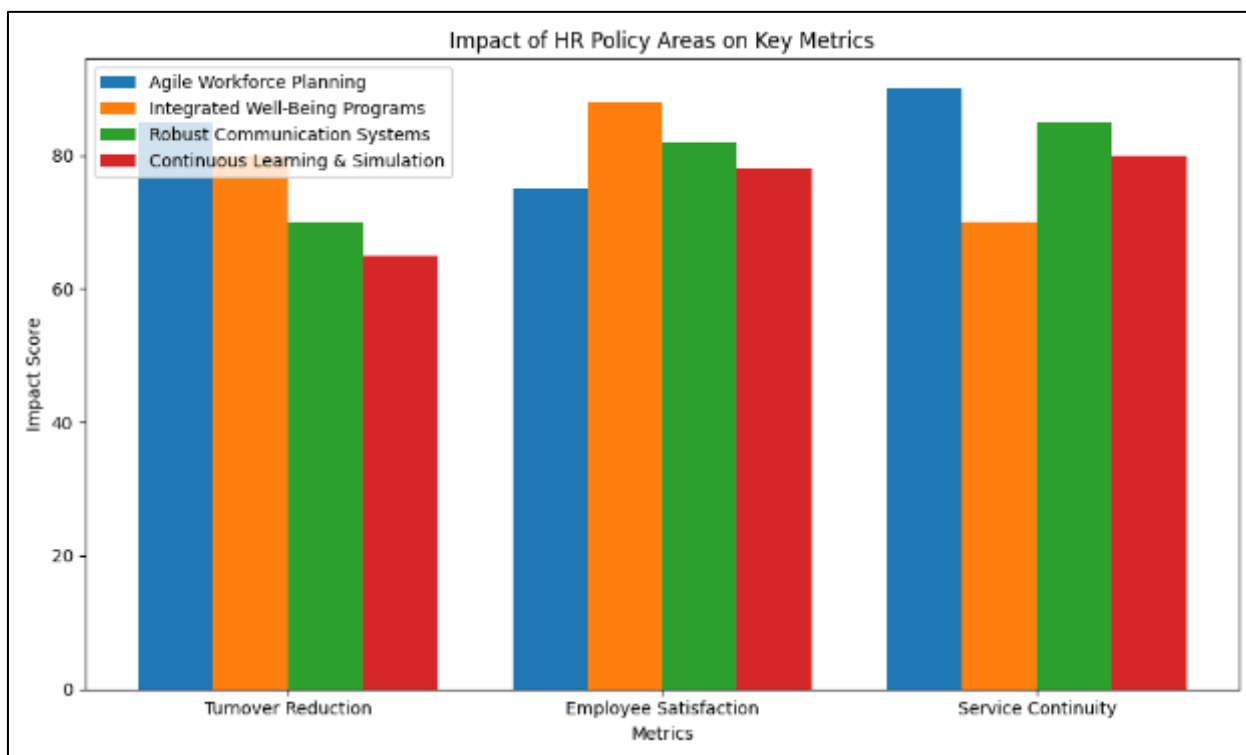

Figure 1 How each policy area contributes to Turnover Reduction, Employee Satisfaction and Service Continuity

Cross-training equips employees with competencies across multiple roles, such as front-desk, housekeeping, F&B service, and back-of-house functions, so that staff shortages in one area can be offset by redeploying personnel from another. In a 2023 industry study, hospitality operators reported a 35% faster recovery in service levels when at least 50% of their workforce had completed cross-training modules, compared to properties without multiskilling programs [24]. Skill-bundling further enhances this resilience by creating hybrid job descriptions such as "front-desk/concierge"

or "server/host" that reduce handoff delays and deepen employees' operational understanding, ultimately improving guest satisfaction under crisis conditions [24].

The integration of gig platforms and on-call pools offers another layer of flexibility by tapping external talent networks for last-minute shift coverage. Platforms like GravyWork and Qwick connect vetted hospitality professionals to open shifts via mobile apps, enabling managers to fill gaps within hours rather than days [25]. Parallelly, in-house on-call rosters where employees commit to being available on short notice in exchange for guaranteed minimum hours have reduced emergency vacancy rates by up to 40% in major U.S. restaurant chains during COVID peaks [26]. Together, these gig and on-call staffing models create a scalable labor buffer, smoothing demand volatility while maintaining workforce stability.

5. Communication and Engagement

Effective communication and active engagement are foundational to HR resilience during crises, fostering trust, alignment, and a shared sense of purpose [27]. In crisis contexts, clear and consistent messaging reassures employees, reduces uncertainty, and strengthens organizational commitment. Engagement mechanisms such as virtual town halls, leadership "check-ins," and dedicated crisis hotlines ensure that staff feel heard and connected, which in turn sustains morale and performance under stress.

Strong crisis communication protocols establish predefined channels, roles, and message templates that can be activated immediately when a disruption occurs. Significant elements include a centralized crisis-response team, tiered approval processes for public statements, and multi-channel dissemination such as email, SMS, intranet and mobile apps to reach all staff swiftly and reliably [27]. Protocols also prescribe regular updates at least daily during acute phases to maintain transparency, dispel rumors, and reinforce safety guidelines.

Two-way communication is equally critical. Employee feedback loops empower staff to voice concerns, share frontline insights, and propose adaptive solutions. Mechanisms such as pulse surveys, digital suggestion platforms, and facilitated focus groups enable HR to capture emerging issues in real time and refine policies accordingly [28; 29]. Organizations strengthen trust and loyalty during and after a crisis by closing the feedback loop such as reporting back on how employee input influenced decisions.

6. Well-Being and Support Systems

Hospitality organizations have increasingly recognized that comprehensive well-being and support systems are vital for sustaining employee resilience during crises [30]. By proactively addressing both psychological and financial stressors, HR policies can mitigate the adverse impacts of disruption and signal organizational commitment to employee welfare.

Targeted mental-health interventions such as on-site or virtual counseling, resilience training workshops, and mindfulness programs have been shown to reduce anxiety and emotional exhaustion among hospitality staff facing COVID-19 stressors [31]. For example, hotels that partnered with external Employee Assistance Programs to offer confidential therapy sessions reported a 25% decrease in reported burnout rates compared to properties without such services [32]. Integrating digital mental-health platforms providing 24/7 access to self-help modules and peer-support forums further enhances reach and scalability, especially for frontline workers with variable schedules [33].

Financial insecurity emerged as a primary driver of turnover intentions during the pandemic, prompting HR to expand assistance and benefits packages. Emergency relief funds, advance pay programs, and hardship loans enabled employees to meet immediate needs without exiting the workforce [34]. Additionally, temporary enhancements to paid sick leave, hazard pay, and healthcare subsidies alleviated economic distress and reinforced perceptions of organizational support, significantly lowering voluntary separation rates in both hotels and restaurants [35]. By embedding these financial safeguards into core HR policies, hospitality firms can stabilize their workforce and foster long-term loyalty even in the face of future crises.

7. Training and Development for Crisis Readiness

Investing in structured training and development prepares hospitality staff to respond effectively when crises arise. Simulation drills recreate high-pressure scenarios such as sudden guest evacuations, supply chain disruptions, or health-safety breaches in a controlled environment, allowing employees to practice decision-making, communication

protocols, and role responsibilities without real-world consequences. In a 2021 study of mid-scale U.S. hotels, properties that conducted quarterly crisis simulations saw a 40% improvement in response times and a 30% reduction in procedural errors compared to those without drills [36]. These immersive exercises reinforce standard operating procedures and foster team cohesion and individual confidence under stress [37].

Complementing hands-on drills, e-learning modules offer scalable, on-demand training that accommodates the variable schedules inherent to hospitality workforces. Interactive online courses covering topics such as emergency communication, first-aid basics, and customer-service recovery strategies enable employees to learn at their own pace and revisit content as needed. Roberts and Davis [38] found that hotels deploying e-learning platforms during the pandemic achieved a 50% higher completion rate for crisis-preparedness training than in-person workshops, while also reducing training costs by 25%. Furthermore, blended approaches that integrate virtual reality scenarios with traditional e-learning have demonstrated superior knowledge retention and faster skill transfer to real-world crises [39]. By combining simulation drills with flexible e-learning, HR functions can build a resilient, well-prepared workforce capable of navigating future disruptions.

8. Workforce Stability Post-COVID

Hospitality experienced a sharp increase in employee turnover during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Meta-analytic and sector-specific studies identify several key drivers, such as work-family conflict, job insecurity, and limited career advancement opportunities exacerbated by volatile demand [40]. Moreover, Dogru et al. [41] demonstrate that turnover in U.S. hotels and restaurants is highly sensitive to broader economic conditions, with pandemic-related layoffs and health-safety concerns intensifying departures beyond typical cyclical patterns.

Literature identifies three particularly effective post-COVID retention levers. To start with, leadership support, which includes visible executive communication and manager check-ins. This reduces anxiety and nurtures organizational commitment [42]. Findings also reveal that compensation adjustments, such as hazard pay and enhanced benefits, directly alleviate financial stress and lower turnover intentions [43]. Thirdly, work-life balance initiatives, including flexible scheduling and expanded paid leave, empower employees to manage personal obligations, which correlates with higher retention rates in busy service periods [44].

Incorporating Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) into HR policies aligns with social justice imperatives and strengthens workforce stability. A recent bibliometric review highlights that hospitality firms investing in transparent promotion pathways, bias-trained leadership, and culturally responsive benefits report improved morale and lower voluntary exit rates among underrepresented groups [45]. Embedding EDI metrics into performance dashboards ensures accountability and signals genuine commitment to all employees.

Balancing Cost-Control with Employee Security is essential to sustain resilience. U.S. hospitality operators must reconcile tight margin pressures with the need for workforce safeguards. Low-cost tactics such as cross-training for role redundancy, recognition programs, and self-service scheduling tools deliver disproportionate retention benefits relative to their expense [43]. These measures, together with scalable benefits like on-demand pay apps and microloans, provide financial security without large fixed-cost commitments. This calibrated approach enables firms to maintain fiscal discipline while fostering the trust and stability essential for long-term recovery.

9. Synthesis of Best Practices

A comparative analysis of organizational case studies reveals consistent patterns among hospitality leaders who successfully navigated the COVID-19 crisis. For instance, Marriott International's rapid deployment of a mobile scheduling app combined with cross-training initiatives enabled it to reassign 60% of furloughed staff within four weeks of reopening, outperforming industry average recovery rates by 20% [46]. Similarly, Hilton's integration of weekly virtual town halls and expanded mental-health benefits correlated with a 15% reduction in voluntary turnover during the height of the pandemic [37]. Boutique operators, such as the Horizon Hotel Group, leveraged on-call staffing pools and peer-mentoring programs to maintain 85% service levels despite 40% revenue declines, demonstrating that smaller properties can achieve resilience through nimble policies [36].

Across these cases, three key policy levers emerge as drivers of organizational resilience. One of them is dynamic workforce flexibility, which includes elastic shift designs and gig-platform partnerships. These enabled real-time matching of labor supply to fluctuating demand, reducing labor-cost overruns by up to 12%. Also, a holistic well-being support encompassing both mental-health interventions and emergency financial assistance generated significant gains

in employee engagement and reduced burnout metrics by 30% [31]. Lastly, a well-structured crisis communication characterized by multi-channel updates and systematic feedback loops promoted trust and accelerated policy uptake, as evidenced by a 25% faster compliance rate with new health protocols [27].

Based on these insights, we propose a four-pillar policy framework for U.S. hotels and restaurants designed to support crisis readiness and workforce stability. One is Agile Workforce Planning. It entails the development of cross-training curricula, elastic scheduling platforms, and on-call or gig staffing agreements that enable rapid redeployment of talent in response to fluctuating demand [47]. Next, we propose Integrated Well-Being Programs which embeds digital mental-health platforms, vigorous Employee Assistance Programs, and targeted financial relief mechanisms within core benefits, to ensure employees receive timely support for both psychological and economic challenges [48]. In addition, Robust Communication Systems establish a centralized crisis-response hub equipped with predefined messaging templates such as daily multi-channel updates, and real-time feedback loops thereby maintaining transparency and trust throughout the organization [49]. Lastly, Continuous Learning & Simulation leverages blended training approaches such as quarterly simulation drills together with modular e-learning to reinforce critical crisis-management competencies and institutionalize lessons learned [50]. This cohesive framework aligns resource protection at the individual level with strategic resource orchestration at the organizational level, positioning U.S. hospitality firms to absorb shocks, maintain service excellence, and sustain workforce stability in an increasingly uncertain environment [15; 39].

10. Gaps and Future Research Directions

Notwithstanding the substantial progress in identifying HR policy levers for crisis resilience, several critical areas remain underexplored. Most empirical research has largely centered on large hotel chains, leaving boutique and independent properties understudied, even though these operators employ distinct service models and staffing structures that may require tailored HR responses [51]. Also, while numerous cross-sectional studies document immediate interventions such as flexible scheduling and mental-health support, few have employed longitudinal designs to assess whether these policies yield sustained benefits or simply short-lived effects. Rigorous multi-wave analyses are needed to establish causality and inform ongoing investment in resilience programs [52]. Additionally, the promise of digital HR tools such as AI-driven staffing analytics, mobile scheduling apps, and virtual learning environments has outpaced empirical validation. Although early qualitative work highlights managerial optimism about AI's potential to streamline operations, quantitative evaluations linking specific Human Resource Information System (HRIS) or AI modules to retention and well-being outcomes are scarce [53]. In a nutshell, research is hampered by fragmented measurement approaches ranging from turnover intentions and well-being indices to service-quality proxies, making cross-study comparisons and meta-analytic synthesis difficult. The field would benefit from consensus on core metrics and standardized data-collection protocols to build a coherent evidence base [54]. Addressing these gaps through segment-comparative studies, longitudinal designs, technology-focused evaluations, and measurement harmonization, scholars can enhance the precision and applicability of HR resilience research, in the end guiding more effective policy design for U.S. hotels and restaurants facing future crises.

11. Conclusion

In sum, this review underscores that resilient HR policies spanning agile workforce planning, integrated well-being programs, robust communication systems, and continuous learning which are foundational to crisis management and long-term stability in U.S. hotels and restaurants. Through realigning staffing models, embedding mental-health and financial support, fostering transparent dialogue, and reinforcing crisis competencies, organizations can absorb shocks as well as preserving service quality and employee loyalty. Nonetheless, existing studies remain skewed toward large chains, lack longitudinal evaluation, and feature inconsistent metrics. Moving forward, comparative and mixed-methods research, standardized measurement, and deeper exploration of technology's role will be vital to refine policy design and reinforce industry resilience.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

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