Emergency Preparedness of the Hotel Industry: The Case of Jordan

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to identify the potential for major emergencies which can occur in Jordanian hotels; questions asked to investigate how these hotels were prepared for emergencies, how they manage and overcome emergencies when they occur; and explore their limitations. The factors influencing successful emergency planning and adoption emergency management in the Jordanian hotels will also be observed. By using qualitative methodology, face-to-face interviews for managers were conducted at three, four and five star hotels. Different backgrounds; such as local, regional and international among the cities of Amman and Petra were also considered. Results revealed that Jordanian hotels are exposed to a wide range of natural and man-made disasters. Jordanian hotels lack proactive emergency planning with many constraints which impede successful emergency planning. Emphasizing the relevant role of authority to demonstrate emergency management to hotels and trying to convince them to adopt such practices in order to cope with emergencies effectively is a unique challenge.

INTRODUCTION

These days, disasters experienced within the hospitality industry have steadily increased over the past few decades. Disaster management has become an important issue as hospitality key players continually seek ways to cope with these unexpected events. Confounded threats to the viability of hospitality organizations [1], create multiple challenges for the private and public sectors [2]. Timothy [3] pointed out that the core of the resolution of a disaster is in the evaluation of the current level of disaster planning and preparedness in the hospitality industry. The relationship between organizational factors (type, size, and age), disaster planning activities and disaster preparedness must be examined.

A wave of catastrophic events struck the hospitality industry in recent years both increasing awareness among emergency managers and scholars. This helped them read, manage, and overcome the impact of emergencies on the hospitality industry [4]. Gheytanchi, Joseph [5] identified the major failure when dealing with disasters and emergencies. Other scholars explain how the hospitality industry could benefit from emergency management to prevent losses and mitigate the negative impacts of the media on affected destinations [6]. Perry and Quanrantelly [7] defined the disaster as “an extreme event with a natural, technological or social cause that has consequences in terms of casualties, and disruptive events. These are all pose a threat to people, properties, and the environment which require a coordinated and rapid response”. These emergency situations have been classified into natural and man-made disasters. Natural disasters may be caused by nature; such as floods, tsunamis, typhoons, and often termed “an act of God”. Man-made disasters are known as socio-technical disasters which could occur in four types: technical disasters, transport failure, stadia failure, and production failure [8].

Jordanian hotels have experienced a wave of disasters and emergencies in the last two decades. Overall, the period from 2000 to date has been affected by natural and man-made disasters rocking political instability in the Middle East. The influence on Jordanian hotels has been negative. Since the September 11, 2001 incident at least 18 major terrorist incidents have targeted the hospitality industry worldwide including two in Jordan [9].

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Methodology:
This study aims to investigate the impacts of emergencies and disasters on the tourism and hospitality industry in Jordan with a focus on emergency planning and preparedness. To undertake this study, a qualitative research methodology was considered the most appropriate method to describe existing issues related to disasters and emergencies affecting Jordanian hotels. Semi-structured face-to-face interviews were used [10]. The semi-structured interviews were conducted between October 2013 and January 2014. 43 key persons in charge of 36 three, four and five star Jordanian hotels were interviewed. The sample was selected using the purposeful snowball method. The sample size was determined using the ‘saturation criterion’. The materials collected in this study were subjected to qualitative thematic analysis aiming to uncover the prevalent themes by identifying, describing and reporting the content of data. Results are follows inclusive of direct quotations to support the study’s findings.

Findings and Discussion:
(i) Emergencies facing Jordanian hotels:
- Respondents were requested to explain the types and magnitude of emergencies that occurred in their hotels in the past.
  The findings revealed that Jordanian hotels were threatened by several emergencies and the political instability in the Middle East. The findings have also show that terrorism, the Amman bombings of 2005, Libyan patient’s profile, financial problems, taxes, pandemics, employee turnover, and natural threats were identified as major emergencies currently facing Jordanian hotels. This is consistent with Sawalha, Jraisat [11] who found that the unstable situation in the Middle East with regard to the Arab Revolution, Iraqi war, and the Palestinian-Israeli conflict were the major emergencies facing Jordanian hotels. This created a barrier but with a great opportunity to develop the country and enhance the peoples’ financial situation. This finding shows that the hotels have been more vulnerable to a wide range of disasters and emergencies and are highly susceptible to them. This is consistent with the Paraskevas and Arendell [9], and Ritchie [12] findings who have argued that the unstable global tourism environment has resulted in making hospitality organizations highly vulnerable to disasters and emergencies.
  The findings also revealed that fires, poor maintenance, low quality security machines, high cost of energy, high taxes and pressure on services were among emergencies facing the hotel industry in Jordan. This gave a negative impact on hospitality businesses, related industries, and the country’s economy.

(ii) Emergency management:
- Respondents were asked to discuss the constraints that their hotels encountered when dealing with emergencies.
  The finding showed that several constraints and barriers impeded successful emergency planning in Jordanian hotels. Respondents revealed that since the September 11 incident, the hotels were forced to follow several procedures, install difference security devices, and hire more security employees. The overall cost for hotel hampered the purchasing of devices and spare parts. Hotels also suffered from the paradoxical relation between hospitality and security. Hotels faced several problems in how to attract security employees from military backgrounds and train them to deal with hotel customers. Problems usually arose from guests who refused to be subjected to security checks and were offended on how security employees spoke to them or did their job. Some respondents mention problems related to employees and their cultural aspects which lead them to turnover and leaving their jobs. Hotel work is considered unworthy especially for girls. Some employees are not concerned about the hotel and tourism aspects in relation to education. This in consistent with Sawalha and Meaton [13] who mentioned that culture plays a sufficient role in the business continuity in Jordanian Companies. Finally, respondents mentioned that current tourism markets are very weak and finding alternative markets in light of the Arab revolution in the Middle East is very difficult. This is because tourists start to search for safer and cheaper destinations.
- Respondents were asked about factors contributing to successful emergency planning in the hotel industry.
  The finding showed that Jordanian hotels lack the strategies that contribute to successful planning in order to mitigate and prevent the negative impacts of emergencies. The findings also clarified the great dependence of hotels on governmental security agents and related organizations. While some emergency plans are still not implemented or neglected by hotels this should fill in the gap to explain why Jordanian hotels are still vulnerable to emergencies. The same findings were realized by Sawalha, Jraisat [11] in their study on best practices for disaster management. The emergency management literature provides a wide range of different frameworks and strategies to be adopted by hotel managements to mitigate the impacts of natural and man-made emergencies. Jordanian hotels seem to have a problem in the practical implementations of such strategies where their focus has been primarily on pre-emergency periods rather than pro-emergency periods. Therefore, Jordanian hotels should adopt one or more emergency planning frameworks to improve safety and security.
Respondents discussed factors that could contribute to successful emergency planning in Jordanian hotels. Effective collaboration between hotels and sharing important information to update their plans, evaluate it regularly and have continuous auditing is imperative. The findings also emphasized the important role of effective free training within the hotels with related organizations. This clarified the important role of civil defense to spread the right knowledge about plans and security systems which meet the international standards. They could help the hotels in fixing the systems, test it, and identify the role of emergency employees in the case of events.

- Respondents were asked about factors impeding successful emergency planning in the hotel industry.

Respondents mentioned a lack of sufficient funds and management styles could impede emergency planning. Others mentioned the mentality of guests using the hotels as it is very difficult to convince the Jordanian and Gulf guests to be subjected to inspections using the security stick or walkthrough gates. Hotels, as commercial companies, look for profit related to the company and employee culture. The matter which leads to the absence of a sense of responsibility tend to ignore the duties when there are limited resources and high taxed. Respondents from five star hotels did suffer a loss because of these factors when compared to three and four star hotels. The reason is that five star hotels should meet the international culture of a Management Company and local government strategies. Furthermore, international companies care more about safety and security for hotels and their guests so sufficient funds are needed to install the necessary devices. This in consistent with Sabri [14] who mentioned that Arab culture is different from Western culture in a the manner which affects the adoption of emergency management among local small and international large hotels.

Conclusion:

Jordan has been subsequently struck by a range of disasters and emergencies. Reflecting on the hotel industry’s vulnerability to hazardous events in the internal and external environment, there has been dramatic fluctuations in tourist arrivals and revenue. Events discussed in this research disclose a wave of disasters affecting the hotel industry in Jordan over the last few decades. The effects on this industry has contribute to the Jordanian GDP and revealed the multiplier effect on the economy. The findings also emphasized that the organization type, age, and size had a great effect on proactive planning and if the organization has faced a disaster before. Preparedness and an updated emergency plan with manager awareness will help the hospitality industry to provide the necessary resources, as well as effective training to avoid or minimize risks. Safety surveillance and security systems are very important to save lives and hospitality properties. These factors can also be used as a marketing tool for guests and meeting planners. Finally, it is important to understand the emergency frameworks to mitigate the effects and be well prepared before a crisis strikes. Furthermore, these frameworks are minimize loss during an evacuation when the disaster happens. Effective proactive planning exists in the governmental level in order to learn from the past and overcome the effects of such events. But unfortunately, this study found negligence with regard to proactive emergency planning by the industry key players.

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