

Covid-19 and Health & Safety in the New Zealand Hotel Industry

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Introduction

In response to the Covid-19 pandemic the New Zealand government implemented a range of previously unprecedented measures such as nationwide lockdowns and border closures to reduce the spread of Covid-19, resulting in significant impacts to the hotel industry. In June 2021, the Pacific International Hotel Management School (PIHMS) held a hotel industry Covid-19 Impact, Reaction & Recovery conference with 14 hotel industry leaders from around New Zealand. During a panel discussion regarding the health & safety impacts of Covid-19 and the resulting government measures, four industry leaders* were asked to discuss the impact and response of the hotel industry in regards to: (1) risk reduction strategies; (2) practices; (3) customer expectations; (4) compliance; and (5) isolation hotels. The discussion was later analysed and key points were identified and outlined below.

Risk Reduction Strategies

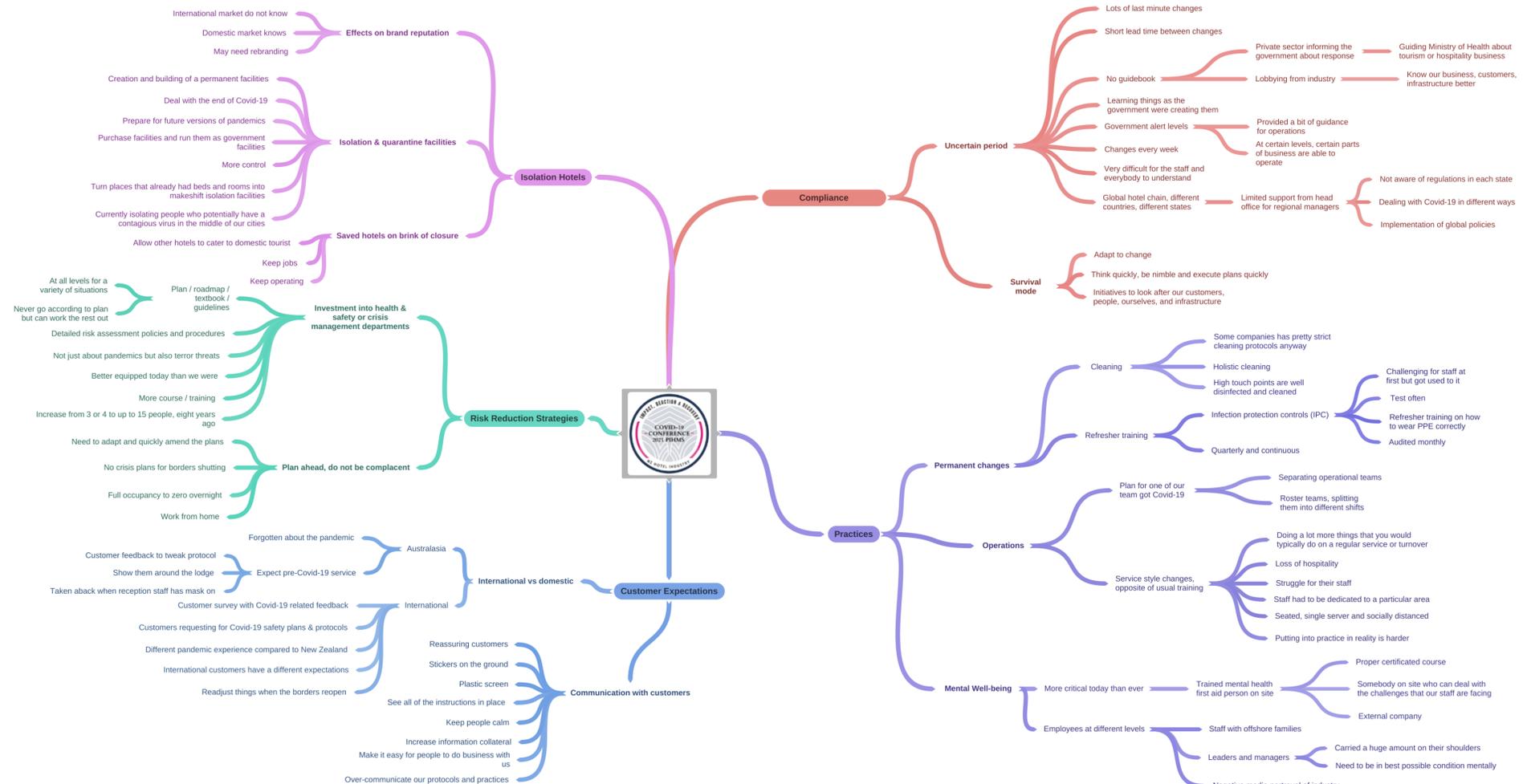
- Pre-pandemic internal health and safety training and detailed risk assessments ensured hotels were well prepared.
- Reinforced the need for having a plan / roadmap / textbook / guidelines for any situation for all organizational levels.
- The lack of a governmental crisis plan for a pandemic and unprecedented international border closures resulted in hotel occupancy dropping to zero overnight.

Practices

- Hotels have adapted their operational practices to suit operating in the current climate by scheduling rosters to plan for when their employees contract Covid-19.
- Some hotels are engaging mental health professionals to provide support to help employees manage uncertainty, anxiety, and stress.
- Refresher training focusing on infection protection controls (IPC) will continue after the pandemic.

Customer Expectations

- Hotels are reassuring customers by deploying measures such as customer communication protocols, placement of social distancing stickers, and installation of plastic screens.
- The Australasia region had a milder Covid-19 experience compared to the rest of the world resulting in a difference in customer expectations between international and domestic guests.
- Domestic guests expected pre-Covid service standards while international customers want to know the hotel's Covid-19 safety plans in advance.



Key themes emerging from the health & safety panel discussion during the NZ hotel industry Covid-19 Impact, Reaction & Recovery conference.

Compliance

- The pandemic resulted in an uncertain period, with governmental health & safety guidelines undergoing constant changes with short lead times between changes.
- Regional hotel managers belonging to global hotel chains received limited support from head offices due to different regions imposing different Covid-19 related restrictions.
- The unprecedented pandemic response resulted in the hotel industry informing the government on how to deal with Covid-19 because hotel managers know their business, customers, and infrastructure better than government officials.

Isolation Hotels

- Hotel employees in managed isolation and quarantine (MIQ) hotels became front line workers in the domestic pandemic management response.
- There should be permanent governmental quarantine facilities to deal with future pandemics and such facilities should not be in the middle of cities.
- The governmental MIQ programme saved some hotels that were on the brink of closure, enabling them to keep operating and keep staff employed.

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