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## **TOURISM IN THE POST-COVID-19 WORLD: WHAT IS THE ROLE OF HUMAN RESOURCES IN TRACING THE PATHS TO RECOVERY**

### **TURIZAM U SVETU POST-COVID-19: KOJA JE ULOGA LJUDSKIH RESURSA U PRAĆENJU PUTA KA OPORAVKU**

**Summary:** *Tourism has been one of the most affected sectors due to the COVID-19 pandemic globally. As a result, human resources (HR) professionals have faced an onset of challenges, as well as, opportunities in the new normal. Therefore, this paper will shed a light on the vital practices that HR professionals in the tourism sector implement and understand how organizations in tourism manage their personnel in these disruptive times. The era of post-COVID-19 calls for resetting, restructuring, and redefining the role of HR, which strives to increase the employees' skills and behaviors and drive forward organizational performance and efficiency. This is why, through theoretical and empirical exploration, this research will try to contribute to the identification of the key HR challenges for the post-COVID-19 world in this sector; the development of a theoretical model of strategic HR management, and highlighting future trends.*

**Keywords:** *exports, investments, economic growth*

**JEL Classification:** *M12, M54*

**Резиме:** *Туризам је један од најтеже погођених сектора због пандемије COVID-19 на глобалном нивоу. Као резултат тога, стручњаци за људске ресурсе (HR) суочили су се са изазовима, као и са приликама у новом нормалном стању. Стога ће овај рад бацити свјетло на виталне праксе које ХР професионалци у сектору туризма спроводе и разумјети како организације у туризму управљају својим особљем у овим разорним временима. Ера пост- COVID -19 захтјева ресетовање, реструктурирање и редефинисање улоге ХР-а, који настоји да повећа вјештине и понашања запослених и унаприједи организациони учинак и ефикасност. Због тога ће, кроз теоријска и емпијска истраживања, ово истраживање покушати да допринесе идентификацији кључних HR изазова за пост- COVID -19 свет у овом сектору, развоју теоријског модела стратешког управљања људским ресурсима и освјетљавању будућих трендова.*

**Кључне ријечи:** *управљање људским ресурсима, туризам, пост- COVID -19.*

**ЈЕЛ касификација:** *M12, M54*

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The spread of the lethal COVID-19 pandemic has led to huge human and financial losses, causing planet-wide health and economic crises (Anderson et al. 2020). Almost simultaneously, the impact of the crises on the hospitality industry was felt across nations. The pandemic brought catastrophic results and a sharp decline in both tourism and travel industries, as some of the main contributors to the global service sector (Abbas 2021). Since the initial outbreak, there has been a change in the behaviors of tourists, their attitudes, and their mental health (Kumar and Nayar 2021). Even more so, the travel restrictions and social distancing practices to prevent the virus from spreading forced a plethora of tourism businesses to lock their doors and not accept guests anymore until the situation enabled them to work again, facing more than 100 million job losses at the start of the pandemic, according to the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTCC) (2020). The Organization for Economic

Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2020) confirms the devastating impact, estimating it to be five times more destructive than 2008's global financial crisis.

After the pinnacle of the COVID-19 pandemic was over, the tourism industry entered the process of recovery and opened up the doors of hotels and restaurants to adventure-seeking tourists and guests. This has brought another onset of challenges in all pores of tourism organizations, grappling with the influx of tourists and the disruption in talent and the niche of the labor market related to tourism workers. The human resource department (HRD) plays a crucial role whenever a change like this happens to maintain the stability and sustainability of organizations in the long run. Even though scholars agree that this role is critical for organizations to understand how to leverage their human resources (HR) capacities to drive recovery efforts, very few studies exist on how tourism can recover from the pandemic crises with the mediation of HR (Arora and Suri 2020).

Over the past decades, human resource management (HRM) has transcended its traditional function of managing labor to a more strategic role of strategic human resource management (SHRM) where employees are viewed as organizational assets, contributing to the sustainability and growth of organizations, particularly during economic declines (Hamouche 2021). The breadth of the literature exploring HR-mediated recovery of the tourism sector is small, especially in the context of a Western Balkan country like North Macedonia (Yeh 2021).

This is why the purpose of this study is to examine concrete HR practices, which are adopted to aid the post-COVID-19 recovery of the tourism industry, presenting an overview of supporting literature, relevant theories that support the objectives, and a process-based framework of HR-mediated recovery, applicable to future crises and disruptions. We will try to explain that by providing answers to the following research questions:

- *RQ1: What does the recovery process look like for tourism organizations in the post-COVID-19 world?*
- *RQ2: Which HR practices can be implemented to aid the recovery of tourism?*

## 1. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 1.1. Tourism recovery

Fotiadis, Polyzos, and Huan (2021) found that the losses in the tourism industry attributed to the COVID-19 pandemic have backtracked the industry growth as much as 15 years, marking the recovery to begin after the summer of 2021. This supports the work by Polyzos, Samitas, and Spyridou (2020) who estimated that it can take a full year after the peak of the pandemic in 2020 for tourist arrivals to return as they were before the crises started.

In its essence, by recovery processes in tourism, we mean organizations getting back to their pre-pandemic levels in terms of economic performance, capacities, and state of operations. To shield themselves from the impact of the crisis and help the post-crisis recovery, tourism organizations develop tourism crisis and disaster management (TCDM) (Yeh 2021). As expressed by Yeh (2021), the role of management isn't to overexert the limited resources at its disposal, including the human capital, budget, and similar, yet patience and temperance are the key to supporting organizations get through crises and retaining most if not all of its employees.

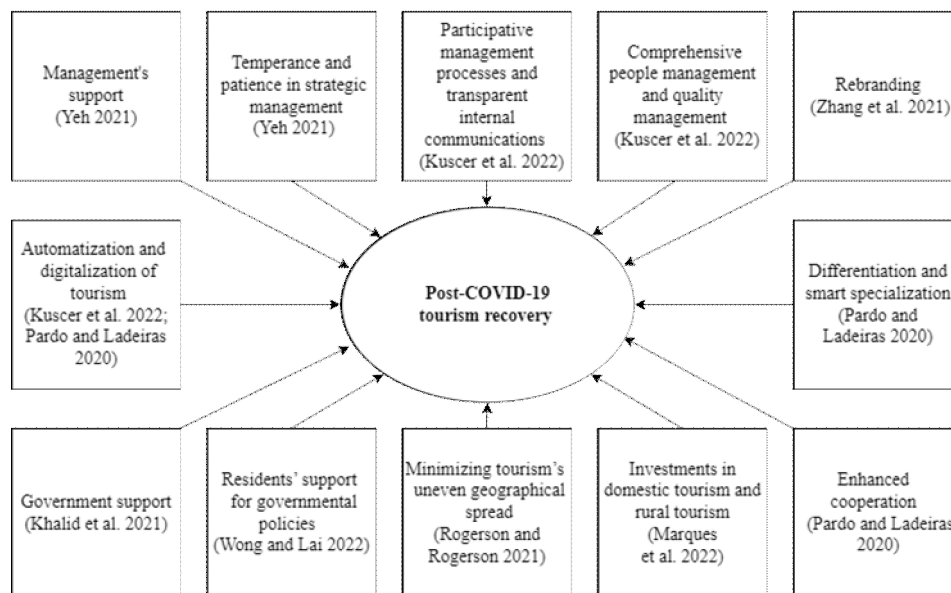
A patient, gradual, and slow process of tourism post-COVID-19 is also outlined by Zhang, Song, Wen, and Liu (2021), who suggest this is due to the high uncertainty and volatility of the pandemic and the change in people's attitudes and behaviors. They also recommend that attractive tourism destinations should rebrand themselves to boost short-term recovery (Zhang et al. 2021).

Kuscer, Eichelberger, and Peters (2022) outlined resilience and sustainability as essential aspects of tourism recovery strategies; they point out that managers should encourage a participative process, encompassing every stakeholder, automatization and digitalization, quality management, transparent internal communication, improvements in comprehensive people management and overall support for tourism businesses.

An essential aspect of the recuperation of tourism is governmental support. Khalid, Okafor, and Burzynska (2021) suggest that a larger stimulus package should be allocated to tourism industries that are deemed vital for the entire economy, thus the support of each domestic tourism can propel global tourism recovery efforts. Related to governmental support, Wong and Lai (2022) emphasize the importance of the residents' support toward the government's policies to accelerate tourism recovery through satisfaction with the policy response and trust in decision-makers.

Similarly, Rogerson and Rogerson (2021) stress the importance of addressing the opportunities of domestic tourism and investing in minimizing tourism's uneven geographical spread. This will likely lead to increased numbers of tourists in less crowded destinations as well as peaceful and secluded places, brimming with nature (Marques et al. 2022).

Figure 1: Overview of factors driving post-COVID-19 tourism recovery



Source: Author's adaptation

Pardo and Ladeiras (2020) argue that the recovery process of the tourism industry should be spearheaded by differentiation and smart specialization through introducing novel approaches and promoting the unique resources of a particular area, as well as, highlighting enhanced collaboration, acquiring new digital skills, and new governance as some of the vital pillars to recovery.

An overview of the key factors driving post-COVID-19 tourism recovery is presented in Figure 1.

## 1.2. HRM during and after the COVID-19 pandemic

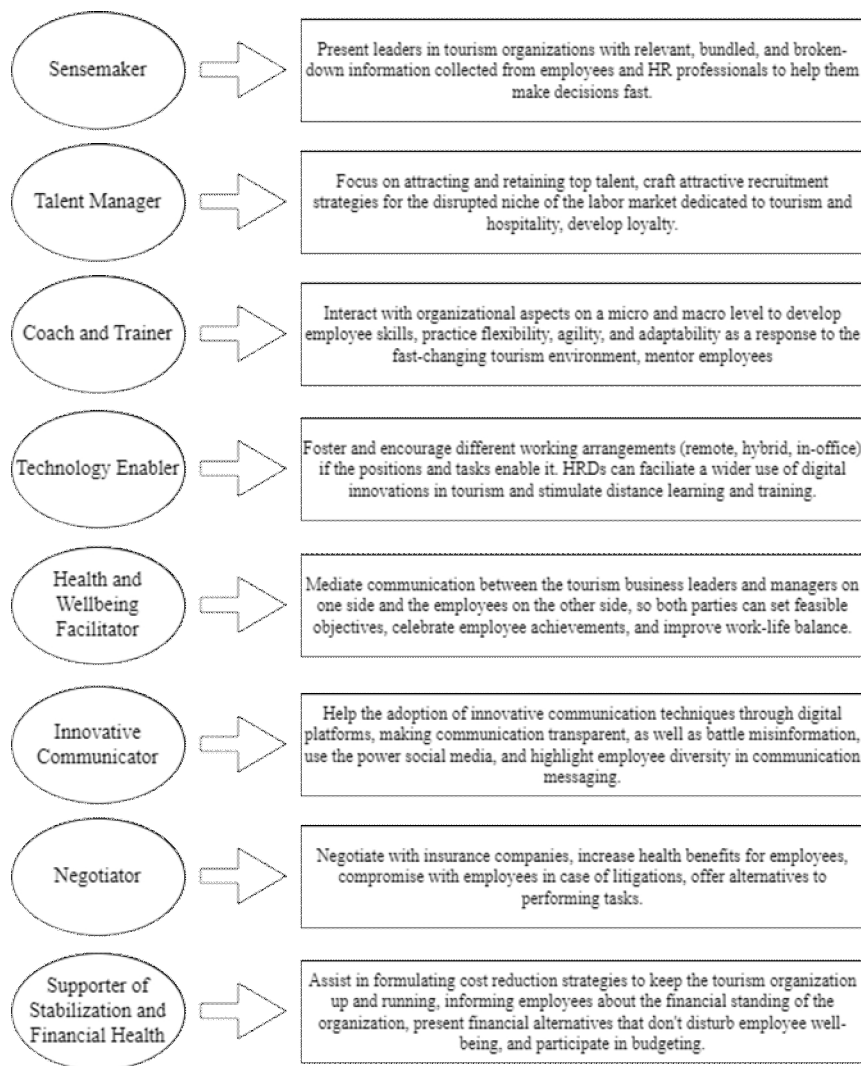
The COVID-19 pandemic, just like other external crises, caused disruptions in the way employees tend to work, their well-being, and their behavior. In this context, HRM can contribute towards organizational recuperation through interventions that encourage both individual and team organizational performance and operational skills and capabilities to successfully manage the crisis at hand (Wang, Hutchins, and Garavan 2009). While Santana, Valle, and Galan (2017) point out that one of the typical responses is cost reduction through

layoffs, downsizing, payment cuts, recruitment freezes, and similar, other evidence as outlined by Teague and Roche (2014) suggests the reinforcement of capabilities and skills to be another go-to HR action in times of crisis.

In such disruptive times, HRDs tend to most likely put the care and well-being of the employees at the forefront through facilitating a culture of caring for each other, coming up with crisis management plans and employee assistance programs, practicing flexibility and agility, increasing the intensity of trainings related to new skills and crisis management, establishing employee committees on health, safety, and security, and similar (Kondrasuk 2004).

Employees differently reacted to the COVID-19 pandemic and even after the peak of the pandemic passed. It is up to HRM to respond to their needs and behaviors as well as organize the workforce around the idea of recovery and getting the business back on track. Considering the specificity of the tourism and hospitality sector, this demands special approaches. Dirani et al. (2020) stress that support from supervisors and HRD, positive encouragement and appreciation of the performed work, and communication are the top employees' priorities when it comes to HR and the pandemic.

Figure 2: HRD roles to support the leadership in tourism recovery



Source: Adapted from Dirani et al. 2020 and Vardarlić 2016

To address these in the recovery process in the post-COVID world, HRD practitioners can assume a variety of roles to support the leadership, presented in Figure 2.

Teague and Roche (2014) identified two pillars of HR practices that are commonly used in an event of a crisis – technical and behavioral practices of a high-commitment model that aims to improve the motivation and commitment of the employees. Technical HR practices refer to cost and payroll reduction, whereas behavioral ones, as the model suggests, relate to fostering an increase of morale in the workforce and a positive change in attitudes and behaviors.

This goes in line with the model of organizational recovery, which is proposed by Allen and Toder (2004), who segment the organizational recovery into several stages: 1) pre-disaster stage, 2) post-incident stage, 3) re-building stage, where the actual recovery plan is implemented, and 4) ongoing recovery stage, that plans for a full recovery after the immediate incident and a possible reorganization. Since at present the third and fourth stages are the most relevant, this is where we see the role of HR to be more prevalent and vital. Building on these theoretical foundations, our study sets out to outline the adopted HR practices, which enable hospitality and tourism organizations to overcome and recover in the post-COVID-19 world.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

Considering the exploratory nature of the study, we applied a qualitative research approach, i.e., a semi-structured interview. This method is suitable for studying the effect of behavior, business interactions on a personal level, and experiences (Myers 2019). Moreover, this approach enabled our interviewees to answer a pre-determined path of questions, and even ask questions, based on emerging themes from the interviews themselves, ensuring flexibility and adaptability to the interviewees' points of view (Myers 2019).

We performed in-depth, semi-structured interviews with HR professionals, practitioners, general managers, and business leaders in the tourism sector in North Macedonia to explore the adopted HR practices to recover after the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic. The interviews were performed online and the duration of each lasted from 40 minutes to one hour. We used a review of relevant literature in HRM, SHRM, and crisis management to develop the interview guide and focus the interview on the impact of COVID-19 on the respondents' tourism and hospitality businesses and the steps and HR practices they have taken to drive the recovery. Table 1 overviews the profile of respondents.

The questioning route adopted in the semi-structured interviews was based on three areas of inquiry: 1) the post-COVID-19 recovery process in their tourism organization, 2) adopted HR practices to boost the recovery process, and 3) factors that enable HR-mediated post-COVID-19 recovery.

*Table 1: Profile of respondents and their relevant characteristics*

	<b>Sex</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Education</b>	<b>Business ownership</b>	<b>Position</b>	<b>Years in the organization</b>
Person 1	F	32	Master's degree	Private company	HR manager	5
Person 2	F	25	Master's degree	Non-profit organization	Manager	4
Person 3	M	31	Bachelor's degree	Private company	HR specialist	3
Person 4	M	26	Bachelor's degree	Private company	Unit manager	6
Person 5	F	40	Bachelor's degree	Non-profit organization	Manager	1
Person 6	F	38	Bachelor's degree	Private company	HR specialist	5
Person 7	F	43	Bachelor's degree	Private company	General manager	3
Person 8	M	29	Master's degree	Private company	HR professional	2
Person 9	F	26	Bachelor's degree	Private company	HR specialist	2

Source: Author's adaptation

Data for the study were collected between January and March 2023. We analyzed it via six iterative phases of the reflexive thematic analysis (RTA): 1) familiarization with the data, 2) coding, 3) deduction of principal themes, 4) formulation and review of themes, 5) improvement and definition of themes, 6) compilation of findings (Braun and Clarke 2021).

### 3. FINDINGS

#### 3.1. Response and recovery from the pandemic

Finding ways to continue working after the initial shock of the widespread pandemic was the top priority for the majority of respondents. The areas on which tourism organizations first focused included ensuring the safety, security, physical and mental health of employees, emergency response, positive communication and empowerment of employees, and efforts to retain employees and equip them with new and enhanced skills.

*We had to rethink our entire business model and how to survive. The first thing we had to do to support our employees was set up work-from-home working arrangements.*

Respondent #7

*My company organized mental health circles online where we made sure our employees are still at the top of the game. Those were devastating times – we didn't know if we are ever going to return to normal. Under my initiative, we managed to increase employee benefits. We sent gifts to COVID-positive employees, too.*

Respondent #3

*The labor market for tourism was wild. We tried our best to retain our employees. While we were at home, we managed to organize several trainings on implementing new technologies and increase the mentoring between more experienced and younger employees. This impacted the team spirit and optimism.*

Respondent #9

The first signs of returning to standard operations and relief in the Macedonian tourism sector occurred when the social distancing rules were canceled. In the first days, the tourism sector was living off of domestic tourists, as the majority of international borders were still closed.

#### 3.2. HR practices that drive post-COVID-19 recovery

As tourism faced the new normal – mask mandates, reduced capacities, new health and safety protocols – the role of HR was to support the managerial decisions and act as a bridge between the workforce and the leadership. In that sense, many HRDs in tourism turned to job redeployment, talent management, increased collaboration with stakeholders and partners, communication and negotiation, and performance management.

*When we started working at the same level as before, we decided we needed motivated and skilled employees who are a fit for our organizational culture. When you have many orders and few members of personnel, you should look for multitaskers.*

Respondent #8

*It was tough to retain employees because they wanted to transfer to industries less hit by the pandemic. Employers and HR practitioners should up with plans for adequate payment and rewards of employees.*

Respondent #1

*You will never succeed in business, especially tourism if you go alone. To recover from the shocks, we increasingly started cooperating with new partners and even ex-employees who stayed in the industry. COVID-19 together with the war in Ukraine made us rethink our supply chain network.*

Respondent #6

*Restaurants and hotels are driven by high-quality service. Frequent performance appraisals are key to that. We need to hold employees accountable and be involved in their work. That way we can affect the motivation of employees and at the same time impress the guests.*

Respondent #4

*There are days when all I am doing is communicating with the employees and getting to know their needs and ideas. We had to ramp up our negotiation skills to improve insurance plans and come up with new deals with the labor unions.*

Respondent #7

### **3.3. Factors and enablers of HR-mediated post-COVID-19 recovery**

The respondents from tourism organizations highlighted factors that can be attributed to both the external environment and the internal situation at their respective organizations. A combination of economic and political factors mostly makes up the external environment group of factors.

*Tourism is heavily affected by local politics and during our recovery process, the country went through local elections. Also, we were hit with rising prices and inflation. In peak season, it was tough to find skilled workers. All of this uncertainty in a way hindered our HR ambitions.*

Respondent #2

Our interviewees agreed that most of the factors that influence HR practices are unique to each organization, and the people inside the organization are the ones who can contribute to HR improvement the most. As a result, factors like budgeting, leadership, culture, capacities, and vision mostly came up as enablers in the internal context of tourism organizations.

*Reducing costs and liquidity tied our hands the most when it comes to HR budgets.*

Respondent #3

*The heart of tourism, and business in general, is people. This was and will be part of our culture.*

Respondent #5

One respondent even mentioned that their employees were willing to sacrifice a part of their salary just to keep the business afloat, which touched them and proved the power of culture and commitment from the workforce. In most cases, this is mutual, as the

conversations demonstrated care for the employees’ welfare from the side of HRDs and management.

*In my mind, the first questions were always how we are going to pay our employees... Terminating contracts was the hardest part for me.*

Respondent #6

Although when it comes to the vision, the priority for most of the organizations was to minimize the damage, survive, and develop further, one of our respondents was willing to part with highly-skilled employees. This was the case with a lower-budget tourism organization.

*I was fine with the medium-skilled employees because I could manage the finances better that way. We have a small place, often visited by small groups of tourists.*

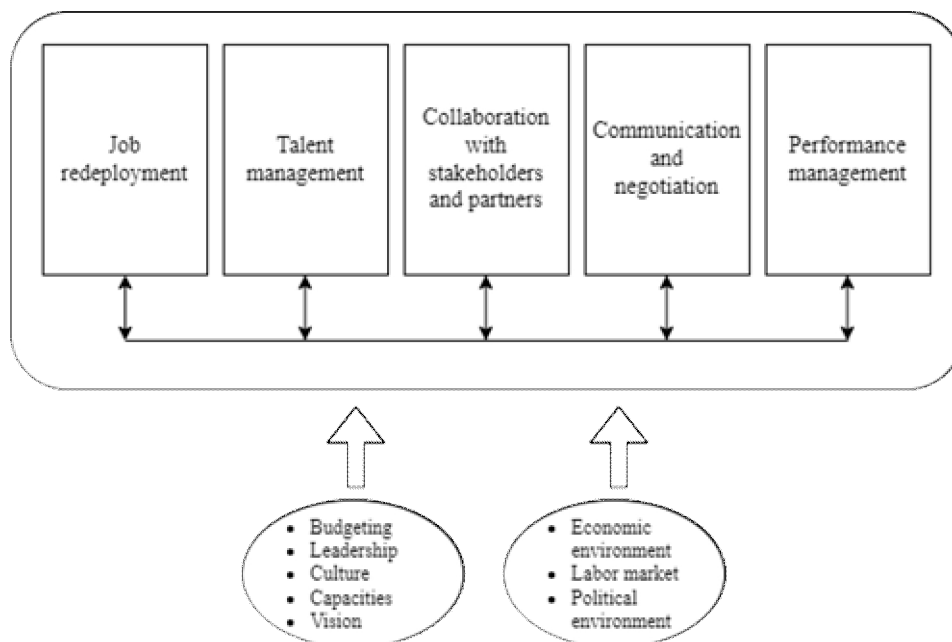
Respondent #4

#### 4. DISCUSSION

It is evident that some HR functions more than others can play a vital role in driving economic recovery in tourism. In this case, the findings based on the semi-structured interviews with HR professionals and members of the management have stressed the need for redeploying jobs, managing talent, measuring and managing their performance, as well as, nurturing transparent and effective communication, which enables a stronger collaboration with stakeholders. These processes are influenced by factors which are internally manageable, and external factors whose influence HR professionals and managers can try to mitigate.

From the discussions and outlined themes, we synthesized a framework of HR practices that tourism organizations focus on in the recovery phase post-COVID in Figure 3.

Figure 3: Proposed framework for HR-mediated tourism recovery



Source: Author’s adaptation



## CONCLUSION

The paper makes several theoretical and practical contributions to broaden the literature on COVID-19 recovery in the context of a Western Balkans country and its tourism and hospitality industry. Basing our study on existing literature in HRM, SHRM, crisis management, and tourism recovery, as well as relevant theories, we have found the core HR practices that HRDs implement in a recovery phase of their businesses after a devastating crisis like the one induced by the pandemic. These include job redeployment, talent management, collaboration, communication and negotiation, and performance management. A set of factors affect the adoption of HR practices and these are both external (less influencing) and internal (more influencing) in nature. The exploratory qualitative study was performed with semi-structured interviews with HR professionals, managers, and business leaders in the tourism sector.

The managerial contributions can be viewed through the practical implications regarding HR crisis management and recovery. The theoretical highlights and the framework provide practical guidelines for companies to help them create and implement action plans for post-COVID recovery.

The study can be expanded to include more contexts and similar countries in the region. Also, authors can test the findings through a quantitative methodological approach.

Moreover, the paper supports the findings of Collins-Kreiner and Ram (2021) that there isn't one right tourism policy or strategy that is adequate for all contexts and countries and that even though countries were implementing tactical measures, very few of them had formal, all-encompassing exit strategies for tourism recovery. Yet it's up to tourism organizations to utilize their (human) resources and invest in adaptability and flexibility to survive and recover.

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