Retaining talented employees during COVID-19 pandemic: The leverage of hotel pandemic response strategies

Islam Elbayoumi Salem
Business Administration Department, College of Economics and Business Administration, University of Technology and Applied Sciences, Salalah, Oman; Alexandria University, Faculty of Tourism and Hotels, Alexandria, Egypt

Hassan Aideed and Nasser A Alkathiri
Business Administration Department, College of Economics and Business Administration, University of Technology and Applied Sciences, Salalah, Oman

Karam Mansour Ghazi
High Institute of Tourism and Hotels in Alexandria (EGOTH), Alexandria, Egypt

Abstract
This study aims to examine the impact of hotels’ pandemic response strategies (service automation, downsizing, restructuring, health protection, and training) on talent retention intentions with the mediation of talent satisfaction and moderation of job insecurity in 4- and 5-star hotels. The sample was composed of 357 talented hotel employees. Findings reveal that automation services, health and safety, and training support were found to positively affect talents’ satisfaction with response strategies and favourably enhance talents’ retention intention through the mediating role of talents’ satisfaction. The findings also suggest that high job insecurity would undermine the positive impact of talent satisfaction on retention intentions. The study contributes to the existing literature by providing theoretical and practical implications in the hotel context and directions for future research.

Keywords
Talented employee, COVID-19, pandemic response strategies, talents’ satisfaction, job insecurity, talents retention intention

Introduction
The global hospitality industry faces several challenges such as talent shortage and high staff turnover, which directly impact costs, profitability, competitiveness, service quality, brand, investment, and ultimately future growth (Baum et al., 2020; Elbaz et al., 2022; Fuentes, 2021; Jooss et al., 2019, 2022; Kravariti et al., 2022). An extensive survey of 1317 hospitality talents found that 9 out of 10 hospitality talents are actively looking for a job, 27% of senior talents and 31% of current hospitality students are unsure or unwilling to work in hospitality again even after rebounding (Fuentes, 2021). The talent shortage problem could cost the global economy 14 million jobs and nearly US$610 billion in GDP by 2024 (WTTC, 2015). It could mean a significant loss of presently qualified talent and the loss of an irreplaceable future asset for all stakeholders (Fuentes, 2021; Jooss et al., 2019, 2022; Kravariti et al., 2022).

In addition to the talent shortage and high turnover problem, the COVID-19 pandemic has heavily hit the hospitality industry, resulting in millions of employees being laid off (victims), and other remaining employees (survivors) being challenged by hard drops in their yield and different changes in their work and lives with...
extremely high levels of job insecurity and physical and psychological risks (Jung et al., 2021; Vo-Thanh et al., 2021). Fundamental crises (like the COVID-19 pandemic) inevitably lead to major changes in an organisation’s work environment and force most hospitality organisations to apply more flexible and innovative transitional strategies that include downsizing to labour cost reduction, and flexible programmes of using employees (e.g. part-time or temporary jobs), carrier automation, and health protection policies in their attempt to overcome the pandemic (Elkhwesky et al. 2022).

These temporary strategies that are conducted because of the pandemic of COVID-19 are generally risky and foster survivors’ negative feelings of anxiety, stress, job insecurity, distrust, powerlessness, loss of morale and motivation, and even burnout regarding their jobs (Bajrami et al., 2021; Jung et al., 2021; Vo-Thanh et al., 2021).

The talent shortage and uncertainty of employment in the hospitality industry, which has been increased by the COVID-19 pandemic, therefore poses an immediate threat to organisational performance and viability (survival), an unprecedented situation that requires hospitality organisations to seek a variety of solutions to best retain their skilled/talented staff to remain competitive and sustained in the future (Jooss et al., 2019, 2022; Jung et al., 2021; Kravariti et al., 2022; WTTC, 2015). Despite retaining skilled (talented) staff in the hospitality industry having received increased attention from both academics and practitioners (Deery and Jago, 2015), research on talent management topics in the hospitality sector remains limited (Jooss et al., 2019, 2022; Kravariti et al., 2022; Sheehan et al., 2018; Vasquez, 2014). Further, although the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the hospitality industry is fairly well documented from customers’ perspectives (Ritchie and Jiang, 2019), there is a lack of studies on the impact of hotels’ pandemic response strategies on employees’ (survivors’) attitudes to remain competitive and sustained in the future (Baum et al., 2020; Jung et al., 2021; Vo-Thanh et al., 2021).

The current study fills this gap by using a nonlinear Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) to examine the impact of the hotel’s pandemic response strategies (service automation, responsible downsizing, restructuring, health protection, and training) as a part of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) on talent retention intentions with the mediation of talents’ satisfaction and moderation of job insecurity in 4- and 5-star hotels. Research literature (Deery and Jago, 2015; Jooss et al., 2019, 2022; Kravariti et al., 2022; Sheehan et al., 2018; Vasquez, 2014) states that despite rising interest from academics and practitioners in keeping competent (talented) workers in the hotel industry, research on talent management (retention) in the hospitality sector remains scarce. Furthermore, Ritchie and Jiang (2019); Baum et al. (2020); Jung et al. (2021); Vo-Thanh et al. (2021) claim that while the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the hospitality industry from the perspective of customers is fairly well documented, studies on the impact of hotel pandemic response strategies on employees’ (survivors’) attitudes to remain competitive and sustained in the future are lacking. CSR is defined by Font and Lynes (2018), p. 1028 as “a process whereby individuals identify stakeholder demands on their organisations and negotiate their level of responsibility towards the collective wellbeing of society, environment, and economy”.

Limited investigations on CSR place considerable priority on internal stakeholders, instead the majority focused on organizational and macro-level inquiry (Zainee and Puteh, 2020). However, prior work has recommended that in order to retain talented employees and secure long-term sustainability, firms should integrate their employee retention practises with CSR, such as providing training and certain steps/protocols related to safety and health (Glavas, 2016; Zainee and Puteh, 2020). In light of this, implementing CSR procedures within the company could be considered as a key element in enhancing talent retention. Drawing on multiple theoretical perspectives, the Conservation of Resources Theory (Hobfoll, 1989), Motivation Theory (Maslow, 1943), Organisational Support Theory (Eisenberger et al., 1986), Social Exchange Theory, and Self-Determination Theory (Ryan and Deci 2000), the study proposed that the hotel’s effective COVID-19 responses may play an important role in attaining its sustainable development via reducing perceived job insecurity and enhancing retention of talented staff through employees’ satisfaction Salem et al. (2022). Thus, the paper is a narrative study that adds valuable contributions to identifying the most effective pandemic response strategies related to talents’ attitudes of satisfaction, job insecurity, and retention intention. The research conceptual framework is shown in Figure 1.

**Literature review and hypothesis development**

**Automation services in the hospitality sector (Automation as a response strategy)**

The COVID-19 pandemic has made tourism businesses further accelerate the implementation of smart tourism services — using Artificial Intelligence (AI), robots, and digital/automated services — (Elkhwesky and Elkhwesky, ...
Such an expansion of automated services in the tourism industry has received both scientific (research) and practical recognition (Fusté-Forné and Jamal, 2021; Koo et al., 2021). The transformation from manpower to automation services/AI is expected to make hotel operations more efficient, reduce costs related to employees, and optimise the experience of customers (Fusté-Forné and Jamal, 2021; Koo et al., 2021). Automation in the hotel industry exists in two forms: substitutive (e.g. robots delivering food and drinks) and supportive - e.g. online payments - (Fusté-Forné and Jamal, 2021). A number of demanding reasons have further stimulated the growth of automated services/AI in the hotel industry, taking the examples of lack of labour, enhancing tourists’ experience, cutting costs, customising guests’ needs/expectations, and providing services around the clock – 24/7 (Fusté-Forné and Jamal, 2021; Koo et al., 2021).

Hospitality 5.0, which comprises advanced contactless technology (e.g. automation, robots, mobile phone technology, AI, Augmented Reality, and Virtual Reality), can be an effective tool during (and after) pandemic times by preventing virus transmission (social distancing) and ensuring both guests’ and employees’ health and safety (Pillai et al., 2021). Renowned international hotel chains such as Hilton Worldwide, Marriott International, and Sheraton have introduced Hospitality 5.0 technologies by using AI and robots (Koo et al., 2021). With a variety of technological options (Hospitality 5.0), choosing the right technology is a challenge in itself, where such technologies should complement hotel employees’ work rather than replace them (Fusté-Forné and Jamal, 2021).

While various departments of the hotel industry are expected to benefit from automated services/AI, there are particular services which are expected to be automated first, relating to maintenance and housekeeping departments (Fusté-Forné and Jamal, 2021). To further add, AI is expected to replace man-powered jobs (service sector) which are of an analytical and mechanical nature, whereas humans will still be wanted (difficult to automate) in jobs where the characteristics of empathy and intuition are needed (Koo et al., 2021). Service automation in the hospitality sector is a double-edged sword where the adoption of Hospitality 5.0 technology will significantly benefit the hotel, customers, and employees (Fusté-Forné and Jamal, 2021; Koo et al., 2021). Still, it can put consumers’ personal information at risk of privacy breaches, surveillance, and data mining (Fusté-Forné and Jamal, 2021). Furthermore, hotel low-skilled employees will feel threatened by becoming redundant as a result of AI/robots (Koo et al., 2021). This subsequently stimulates their turnover intent and sparks a sense of job insecurity (Koo et al., 2021). Based on the above discussion, the following hypothesis is proposed:

Hypothesis 1. Automation services are significantly related to talented satisfaction with response strategies.

Downsizing as a response strategy

The COVID-19 outbreak along with the precautionary measures imposed (e.g. travel restrictions) has severely affected the hospitality sector, forcing hotels to downsize (partial or full) the number of employees in an attempt to cut costs (Abuelnaser, 2020). Downsizing is defined by McDevitt et al. (2013, as cited in Abuelnaser, 2020, p. 168) as “a global management strategy that is purposively undertaken to reduce organization employees”. Employees who escape termination in the downsizing...
process (remain in the organization) are referred to as “survivors” (Abuelnasr, 2020). The anticipated success or failure of an organization’s downsizing process relies on how survivors respond to pre and post-downsizing (Abuelnasr, 2020).

The downsizing strategy resulting from COVID-19 is a risky attempt for organizations, where comprehending the potential shift in survivors’ attitudes could help reduce this risk (Abuelnasr, 2020). While survivors are the lucky ones to continue working in the organization in turbulent situations (i.e. COVID-19), they may experience some negative impacts resulting from the downsizing process. To illustrate, downsizing strategies can make employees feel pressured, lack of motivation and morale, discontent, angry, sick, concerned, job insecurity, and nervous, consequently affecting their job performance (Abuelnasr, 2020; Vo-Thanh et al., 2021). Abuelnasr (2020) claimed that survivors after downsizing (including those with investments in the working organisation) might not choose to continue working in the organization (seeking another career), especially when they are faced with salary cuts and compulsory leaves (Abuelnasr, 2020). Based on the above discussion, the following hypothesis is proposed:

**Hypothesis 2.** Downsizing is significantly related to talented satisfaction with response strategies.

### Restructuring as a response strategy

The COVID-19 pandemic has made organizations’ Human Resources (HR) departments make some disruptive alterations, among them employee restructuring (Biron et al., 2021). Such drastic changes (i.e. restructuring) aggravated by the pandemic can be seen by organisations as a viable solution, although it can increase employees’ sense of job insecurity (Biron et al., 2021; Vo-Thanh et al., 2021). Based on the above discussion, the following hypothesis is proposed:

**Hypothesis 3.** Restructuring is significantly related to talented satisfaction with response strategies

### Health and safety as a response strategy

During a crisis, particularly in the case of COVID-19, the issue of health and safety (particularly hotel employees) has received more attention (Salem et al., 2022). In the workplace, employees are occasionally subject to injuries and accidents, whereas during pandemics hotels should implement emergency procedures to ensure employees’ health and safety (Salem et al., 2022). This is done by the tourism/hospitality sector by following certain steps/protocols related to safety, health screening, disinfection, hygiene, and cleanliness (Salem et al., 2021; Pillai et al., 2021). During pandemics, technology can play an important role by providing contactless services that reduce the risk of contamination. These services include smart control of in-room facilities (such as lighting, air conditioning, door entry, and TV), online payments, automated check-in and check-out, and robotic room food delivery (Pillai et al., 2021; Salem et al., 2022).

Throughout pandemics, official competent health and safety authorities and experts can assist hotels by providing guidelines, recommendations, information, procedures, and training to keep employees healthy and safe from disease (Salem et al., 2021). Such initiatives, established by governmental health authorities to provide hotels with guidelines to deal with the COVID-19 situation, have shown their effectiveness in protecting hotel employees from the pandemic (Salem et al., 2021). Furthermore, such authorities can help protect hotel employees’ health and safety by supplying them with virus detection and protection (e.g. masks) equipment, as well as sterilisers (Salem et al., 2021). Through training (preferably online to prevent infection), hotels can ensure that their employees are familiar with such disease-preventive and hygienic measures to safeguard hotel customers and employees’ health and safety (Salem et al., 2021).

When the pandemic begins to subside, the implemented health and hygienic practices should not be halted, and employees should be regularly educated about them through training courses and meetings (Pillai et al., 2021; Salem et al., 2021). In uncertain situations (COVID-19), putting in place health and safety measures does not guarantee that every employee will follow them (Bajrami et al., 2021). Some employees might ignore or only partially follow the rules just to keep their job. Despite the stress and anxiety caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the stringent health and safety measures have worsened the situation for service sector employees, making them feel more frustrated and worried (Bajrami et al., 2021). As recommended by international health organisations (i.e. World Health Organization) to utilise contactless services during the COVID-19 pandemic, hotels are expected to continue using such contactless services (Hospitality 5.0 technologies) post-pandemic, becoming the new norm in the hotel sector (Pillai et al., 2021). Based on the above discussion, the following hypothesis is proposed:
Hypothesis 4. Health and safety are significantly related to talented satisfaction with response strategies.

Training support as a response strategy

Training is deemed vital if an organisation seeks to retain employees in the long run (Vasquez, 2014). Retention of employees is not the only benefit hotels attain from training courses; it also helps to decrease unsatisfactory performance (improve productivity) and resolve conflicts among employees and between employees and hotel guests (Vasquez, 2014). Despite its high financial cost, hotels’ neglect of training, especially cross-cultural training, can result in the employees’ lacking essential skills, consequently leading to the failure of services (Scott, 2016; Vasquez, 2014). As a result (i.e. high cost of training), some hotels during a crisis defer training, especially when there is no government support in this regard (Salem et al., 2021).

Hotel managers can benefit from training by gaining critical knowledge and skills in employee leadership, whereas employee enrollment in training courses improves morale, productivity, and work satisfaction (Garcia et al., 2022; Salem et al., 2021; Vasquez, 2014). In contrast, hotel employees who were offered a limited number of poor training courses showed low levels of job satisfaction (Salem et al., 2021). Recognizing the value of formal education, governments have begun to fund apprenticeship programs, and the number of universities offering hospitality and tourism degrees is increasing (Sheehan et al., 2018). Such official attention towards education and training in the hospitality sector should be viewed as highly important, taking into account the size and the high job opportunities that the hospitality sector offers to the community (Sheehan et al., 2018). Based on the above discussion, the following hypothesis is proposed:

Hypothesis 5. Training support is significantly related to talented satisfaction with response strategies.

Retention of talented employees

Nowadays, employee retention has become an important aspect of organizations’ business strategies (Chee, 2017; Scott, 2016). Organizations often encounter the issue of high turnover, which leaves them with a more difficult situation — a lack of talented and skilful employees (Chee, 2017; Scott, 2016). Mai and Thuy, 2021: p. 49) describes talented people as “those who have outstanding qualities and abilities to be able to undertake a job or a difficult field of activity, complex and successful, efficient, very high quality, sometimes the highest in a certain range”. As hotels eagerly seek to recruit talented employees (for their future existence), retaining them has become the main challenge, and hotel management should pay great attention to this issue (Chee, 2017). Failing to retain employees can negatively affect the hotel in terms of quality of customer service, social responsibility, organisation morale, job satisfaction, achieving the hotel’s set goals, productivity, competitive advantage, and organisational performance (Chee, 2017; Mai and Thuy, 2021; Scott, 2016; Vasquez, 2014). Despite the challenges hotels face in retaining employees, it can be done if the hotel management demonstrates a sense of cooperation, leadership, and commitment (Vasquez, 2014). In addition, the non-significant association between downsizing strategy and talents’ satisfaction and retention intention could indicate that organizations in their downsizing strategy are not affecting the talented staff due to their outstanding qualities and abilities to accomplish sophisticated and productive tasks (Mai and Thuy, 2021).

To retain talented employees in the hospitality sector for longer periods, several retention strategies need to be implemented (Vasquez, 2014). Such employee retention strategies can include development and training programs, showing support and value, aligning employees’ job aspirations with job tasks, increasing wages, establishing a cooperative environment between employees and management, work/life balance; employee involvement, promotions, benefits, incentives, and appropriate work atmosphere (Chee, 2017; Kichuk, 2017; Salem et al., 2021; Scott, 2016; Vasquez, 2014). Based on the above discussion, the following hypothesis is proposed:

Hypothesis 6. Talented satisfaction with response strategies is significantly related to talented retention intention.

Moderating employee job insecurity

The COVID-19 pandemic has played an effective role in aggravating the job loss perception among hotel employees, which does not only affect individuals but extends to include communities and organisations (Abuelnassr, 2020; Biron et al., 2021; Jung et al., 2021). Abuelnassr (2020): p. 169) explains job insecurity as “a perceived threat to the continuity and stability of employment as it is currently experienced”. Despite being survival employees during the pandemic, survivors’ perceptions of job insecurity should be examined, as they may well experience job insecurity symptoms/implications such as salary cuts and a challenging work environment as a result of the imposed COVID-19 preventive measures (Abuelnassr, 2020). A number of reasons are attributed
to the feeling of job security among employees, for instance, ineffective downsizing approaches, layoffs, future uncertainty, organisation restructuring, lack of trust and commitment, and the possibility of being replaced by AI (Abuelnasr, 2020; Jung et al., 2021; Koo et al., 2021). Employees holding a sense of job insecurity will affect the organisation and employees in terms of productivity, punctuality, efficiency, commitment, job satisfaction, performance, absenteeism, and turnover intent (Abuelnasr, 2020; Chen and Eyoun, 2021; Jung et al., 2021; Koo et al., 2021). The effects of job insecurity on employees are not confined to their workplace environment, but can negatively affect their psychological, mental, and physical health—e.g. anxiety and frustration—(Chen and Eyoun, 2021; Jung et al., 2021; Koo et al., 2021). Based on the above discussion, the following hypothesis is proposed:

**Hypothesis 7.** Job insecurity moderates the relation between talent satisfaction with response strategies and talent retention intention.

**Mediating role of employee satisfaction**

As employees spend long times at work, job satisfaction becomes an important matter for them (Salem et al., 2021). The hotel industry is known for experiencing high turnover, job discontent, a stressful workplace, and lengthy work hours (Kichuk, 2017; Koo et al., 2021). Achieving job satisfaction is among organizations’ top goals for success, where it (i.e. job satisfaction) can be an indicator of employees’ turnover intention (Chee, 2017; Kichuk, 2017; Mai and Thuy, 2021; Scott, 2016; Wong et al., 2021). Employees’ job satisfaction is about retaining talented workforces; therefore, employee satisfaction in the service sector is considered an important element (Ashton, 2017; Kaewsaeng-on, 2016; Kichuk, 2017; Koo et al., 2021). Wong et al. (2021: p. 2) describes job satisfaction as “pleasurable emotional state resulting from the appraisal of one’s job as achieving or facilitating the achievement of one’s job values”.

Employees become satisfied at work when several elements exist, such as receiving sufficient benefits, life and work balance, fair treatment, a healthy and stress-free environment, and empowerment (Ashton, 2017; Salem et al., 2021; Wong et al., 2021). Hotels which apply retention strategies will have satisfied employees, subsequently showing an improvement in customer service, better profit, satisfied customers, employees demonstrating good behaviour, and the organisation gaining a competitive advantage (Jooss, et al., 2019; Salem et al., 2021; Vasquez, 2014). Hotel managers (including HR) can play a role in making employees feel satisfied at the workplace. This is by exhibiting leadership traits such as commitment to provide outstanding services, inspiring and motivating employees, good attitude, justice, providing health support (e.g. insurance), improving skills through training, promotions, ethical environment, transparency, involvement, rotating positions, being supportive, fostering good moral values, and giving employees’ individual needs appropriate attention (Ashton, 2017; Kaewsaeng-on, 2016; Kichuk, 2017; Salem et al., 2021; Scott, 2016).

On the other hand, work colleagues can influence job satisfaction by showing good behavior, which in turn creates a favourable working environment, synergies teamwork and encourages team commitment and collaboration (Ashton, 2017). Having unsatisfied employees at work can result in some negative outcomes. For instance, high turnover, negative attitudes at work, poor performance, and morale drop, subsequently negatively affecting an organization’s profitability (Ashton, 2017; Chee, 2017; Mai and Thuy, 2021).

Based on the above discussion, the following hypotheses are proposed:

**Hypothesis 8.1.** Satisfaction with response strategies mediates the relation between automation and retention intention.

**Hypothesis 8.2.** Satisfaction with response strategies mediates the relation between downsizing and retention intention.

**Hypothesis 8.3.** Satisfaction with response strategies mediates the relation between restructuring and retention intention.

**Hypothesis 8.4.** Satisfaction with response strategies mediates the relation between response training and retention intention.

**Hypothesis 8.5.** Satisfaction with response strategies mediates the relation between health and safety and retention intention.

**Research methodology**

**Sampling design and data collection**

The data for this study was gathered through a survey of talented employees in Egyptian 4- and 5-star hotels. In order to select the talented respondents, this study applied purposeful sampling, which allows the researcher to choose a case because it fulfills a set of criteria (Patton, 2015; Silverman, 2017). The criteria to select talent respondents were guided by the literature on talent management and by the recommendation of the head of HR or the heads of talent management. Consistent with talent management literature, the study
used the following criteria: (a) being a manager or employee with high potential and high performing; (While specific definitions depend on organisational contexts, a strong focus is placed on high performers and/or high potentials); (b) having at least 12 months of experience in the organization, and (c) being retained during the COVID-19 pandemic period consistent with the study context to examine the relationships of response strategies with talent retention (Collings and Mellahi, 2009; Jooss et al., 2019, 2022; Kravariti, et al., 2022; Mai and Thuy 2021; Tansley, et al., 2007; Zhang et al., 2014).

Both the talent management and hospitality literature reveal a lack of clarity, conceptualisation and theorisation, along with a significant lack of empirical evidence with regard to the talent definition and identification processes (criteria) (Jooss, et al., 2019, 2022; Kravariti, et al., 2022). It also found that talents differ to an extent across the various hospitality and tourism sectors and countries, suggesting that talent’s operationalisation is context-dependent. Given that context (e.g. country, industry, sector) impacts the operationalisation of talent and talent management processes (criteria). The definition and identification of “talent” (criteria) depend quite a lot on the approaches of the researcher, the context, and the specifics of the organisation (Mai and Thuy, 2021; Jooss et al., 2022; Kravariti et al., 2022). While talent definition and identification (criteria) depend on organisational contexts, a strong focus is placed on high performers and/or high potentials (Collings and Mellahi, 2009; Jooss et al., 2019, 2022). Talent is predominantly viewed as high-performing, high-potential talent, which can contribute considerably to the organisation.

Thus, the first main criterion is the high-performing, high-potential individual. In line with Tansley et al. (2007), an immediate contribution through high performance or in the longer term by showing high potential was a key factor in their understanding of talent. Based on the data analysis of extant literature, the criteria to identify talent can be clustered into seven broad areas: competency framework, intellectual abilities, education, experience, performance, potential, and readiness (Jooss et al., 2019, 2022; Kravariti et al., 2022). Thus, the second main criterion is the talent experience in the organization. The third criterion has to do with the purpose of the study, which is to test the relationships between pandemic response strategies and talent behaviours of satisfaction and retention during pandemic periods. These criteria were selected as the study aims to examine the impact of the hotel’s pandemic response strategies on talent retention intention during COVID-19, in which the talent respondent should have been there during this pandemic and have at least 12 months of experience in the organisation. In this research case, talented employees are selected as the target sample due to the fact that during the peak outbreak of COVID-19, the hospitality industry severely suffered from the pandemic due to lockdown measures. Such measures did not only impose a major challenge to the hotel from a financial perspective but also resisted the retention of talented employees with whom they had heavily invested in recruiting and training.

Talented hotel employees are essential to the successful operation of a hotel, as hotels rely on them to provide high-quality service to hotel guests. Losing talented employees would have been a great hit for hotels at the time, taking into account the costly and time-consuming process of re-recruiting them. Consequently, examining how hotels used effective retention strategies to retain talented employees during the COVID-19 period would be a significant insight, a valuable contribution to knowledge, and have beneficial practical implications. The COVID-19 period was particularly examined in this research case since the hospitality sector was one of the main service sectors to be severely affected by the pandemic (e.g. lockdowns). Among the inevitable consequences the hotel had to bear, besides financial loss/total collapse, was talented employees’ turnover. This has exacerbated the hotel industry’s challenges, which include mitigating financial risks and retaining talented employees.

Using purposeful sampling, the head of HR or the heads of talent management acted as gatekeepers by approving the research and assuring access to respondents in the hotel (Creswell, 2014). Provided with the three criteria as outlined above, they selected respondents who they deemed appropriate. The researcher relied on the judgement of the gatekeepers of the study to identify suitable participants. An email was sent to HR managers or talent managers of all 4- and 5-star hotels in Egypt, inviting them to take part in the research by sending a link to the survey to all of their talented employees. All the responses were collected via a web-based survey. The managers sent a link to the survey only to those who were still employed during the pandemic period and who met the above three criteria.

The sampling procedure was conducted in May and June 2021 during the COVID-19 pandemic time by email. This method of data collection was chosen to avoid the risks of infection for researchers and participants. All questionnaires were completed voluntarily by respondents. First, the authors went through the Egyptian Hotel Guide (Egyptian Hotel Association, 2020) to identify appropriate hotel properties. Second, the authors contacted the human resources directors (HRDs) of the identified hotels by email. In the email,
the authors explained the purpose of the study and the type of employees targeted for the study and requested the HRDs’ permission and assistance in distributing the survey to the talented employees in their hotel. Third, the survey was distributed to the HRDs of the participating hotels in the month of May 2021. The HRDs then distributed the survey to employees within their hotels who were meeting the above three criteria. Fourth, a reminder email was sent to the HRDs one and 3 weeks after the survey was distributed to the hotels. The final data for inclusion in the study was collected before the end of June 2021. The survey was sent out to 357 potential candidates, in this case, employees who had been formally identified by the hotel (HR manager) as meeting the above three criteria.

The final sample was composed of 357 talented hotel employees, deemed suitable for studies using a quantitative approach (Hair et al., 2014). The descriptive profile of the respondents is presented in Table 1. In terms of hotels, the majority (63.9%) worked in 5-star hotels, with 36.1% working in 4-star hotels. In terms of the number of rooms, 56% had 150 or more, while 33.1% had 100 or less than 150 rooms. The respondents were from various hotel departments, including the kitchen (34.5%), front office (18.5%), restaurant (16%), accounting (7.6%), marketing (6.4%), housekeeping (4.5%), and HR (2.1%). Regarding gender, 260 were male (72.8%) and 97 were female (27.2%). The majority of respondents were between the ages of 18 and 25 years old (90.8%). As for work experience, the majority (55%) had 3 years or more of professional experience, and others (45%) had 1 year or less than 3 years of experience.

**Survey measures and development**

The survey consisted of eight sections. In the first section, the purpose of the study was presented. Furthermore, a statement about the importance of answering the survey questions was presented. In addition, there was a statement concerning the privacy of the respondent’s answers and the guarantee of the respondents’ anonymity. At the end of this section, the respondents were asked to consent to participating in the study. All the surveys included in the final data collection were from consenting respondents only. The second to seventh sections concentrated on the survey measures, namely automation (AUT), downsizing (DOW), restructuring (RES), training support (TRN), health and safety (HES), talented satisfaction with organisation COVID-19 responses (TSRS), job insecurity (JIS), and talent retention intention (TRET).

These measures were developed from prominent scales to ensure reliability and validity. The AUT construct was created by combining four items from Lukanova and Ilieva (2019), Zeng et al. (2020), and Ivanov et al. (2020). The DOW construct was developed using five items and the RES construct was

| Table 1. Sample characteristics (N = 357). |
|------------------------------------------|
| **Characteristics** | **Percent** | **Hotel type** | **Percent** |
| Experience | | |
| One year and less than 3 years | 161 [45%] | Four stars | 129 [36.1%] |
| 3 years and more | 196 [55%] | Five stars | 228 [63.9%] |
| Age | | |
| 18–25 Years | 324 [90.8%] | Less than 100 | 39 [10.9%] |
| 26–40 Years | 28 [7.8%] | 100 and less than 150 | 118 [33.1%] |
| 40–55 Years | 2 [0.6%] | 150 and more | 200 [56%] |
| More than 55 Years | 3 [0.8%] | | |
| Gender | | |
| Male | 260 [72.8%] | | |
| Female | 97 [27.2%] | | |
| Department | | |
| Front of office | 66 [18.5%] | | |
| Kitchen | 123 [34.5%] | | |
| Restaurant | 57 [16%] | | |
| Housekeeping | 16 [4.5%] | | |
| Accounting | 27 [7.6%] | | |
| Marketing | 23 [6.4%] | | |
| HR | 8 [2.1%] | | |
| Others | 37 [10.4] | | |
developed using two items, both adapted from Santana et al. (2017); Thumiki et al. (2019); Bajrani, et al., (2021); Biron et al. (2021), Jung et al. (2021), and Kim and Pomirleanu (2021). The TS construct was developed using five items, adapted from Salem et al. (2021). The HES construct was developed using five items, adapted from Salem et al. (2021) and Robina-Ramirez et al. (2021). For the AUT, DOW, RES, TRN, and HES constructs, the scores were given on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (always). The TSRS construct was developed using three items, taken from Vo-Thanh et al. (2021). The JIS construct was developed using three items, taken from Vo-Thanh et al. (2021) and Jung et al. (2021). The TRET was developed using five items, taken from Mai and Thuy (2021). Appendix 1 is accessible via https://drive.google.com/file/d/192bJJ9sz-Waceb6L5Ek75t91z72IS3ou/view.

For the TSRS, JIS, and TRET constructs, the scores were given on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). In the eighth section, demographic and occupation questions were asked. These included questions about gender, age, experience, department, hotel type, category, and the number of rooms. The measures were first developed and revised in English and then transliterated into Arabic by a professional transliterator. This standard back-translation method is to ensure the authenticity and identicalness of intent of the measures, as recommended by Brislin (1986). The results of the back-translation demonstrated that there was high compliance between the Arabic and English versions of the measures. Next, the survey was reviewed by three academics and three HRDs to ensure readability and accuracy. The reviewers noted that the survey was readable. Based on their comments, the authors made some changes to the explanatory descriptions at the start of each section, but no changes were made to the measures.

Data analysis and results

To analyse the collected data, PLS-SEM was used by exploiting WarpPLS7 (Kock, 2020). PLS-SEM involves the estimating of two models: the measurement model and the structural model (Hair et al., 2021). To test multicollinearity and Common Method Bias (CMB), Harman’s single factor test was conducted, whose results revealed that the principal factor was below 50% of the variance. Therefore, this dataset had no problem with CMB (Chin et al., 2012). CMB was further tested in WarpPLS using the Average Full Collinearity Variance Inflation Factor (AFVIF) that affirmed all variables had values (1.43) of less than 3.3, which is ideal (Kock, 2020). The PLS-SEM assessment is comprised of a two-step process; the measurement model through Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA), followed by testing the hypothesised structural relationships among the key constructs included in the conceptual model.

Measurement model

Hair et al. (2021) provided guidelines for selecting reflective constructs, which were followed in this study. The Composite Reliability (CR), Cronbach’s Alpha, Average Variance Extracted (AVE), and the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) were all used to determine convergent validity. Table 2 illustrates the CR and Cronbach Alpha values, both of which were higher than the recommended level of 0.7. The AVE values were greater than 0.5 (range: 0.525–0.865), indicating adequate convergent validity (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). In addition, all variables had VIF values of less than 3.3 (range 1.079–3.014), which is ideal, and there was no multicollinearity or common method bias (Kock and Lynn, 2012).

Second, the study’s major constructs’ discriminant validity is evaluated. The square root of AVE for each construct was tested with correlations among the latent variables, as depicted in Table 3, demonstrating adequate discriminant validity (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). Henseler et al. (2015) have presented a new method for verifying discriminant validity that focuses on the multitrait-multimethod matrix to assess discriminant validity: the Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) ratio of correlations (see Table 3). All of the study variables had a discriminant validity of less than 0.85, indicating that they were acceptable.

Structural model, hypotheses testing, mediation, and moderation analysis

To estimate the model fit, Standardised Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR) was employed (Henseler et al., 2015). A SRMR value of 0 would indicate an ideal fit, and generally, a SRMR value of ≤0.1 is rated as satisfactory for PLS models (Kock, 2020). In this study, an SRMR of 0.086 resulted in a satisfactory model fit. As shown in Table 4, hypothesised relationships were supported, except for H2 ($\beta = 0.074$, $p$-value = 0.08) and H3 ($\beta = -0.043$, $p$-value = 0.20). Furthermore, as depicted in Figure 2, R2 shows the effect of the exogenous constructs on endogenous constructs and tests the predictive accuracy of the model. Values below 0.25 show a weak accuracy, those lower than 0.50 indicate a moderate accuracy, and values below 0.75 imply a solid predictive accuracy. Talented satisfaction with response strategies and retention intention explained
58% and 53% (respectively) of the variance in crisis response strategies. The mediation effects were employed to examine the significance of the indirect effects. Table 5 exhibits the mediation analysis results. Indirect effects were assessed to uncover the mediating role of talented employee satisfaction with response strategies in the association between automation, downsizing, restructuring, health and safety, and training and retention intention. The findings show that talented employee satisfaction with response strategies partially mediates the link between automation, health and safety, and training and retention intention, but does not mediate the relationship between downsizing and restructuring and retention intention. Thus, H8.1, H8.4, and H8.5 are accepted, but H8.2 and H8.3 are not supported.

The moderation effects of using the two-stage approach were also measured to indicate if the relationship between some variables is strengthened or dampened. The formula proposed by Kock (2020) was used to evaluate the variations in path coefficient. To examine the probability of the moderating effect, talent satisfaction with response strategies as a predictor and job insecurity as a moderator were multiplied to generate an interaction construct to predict talent retention intention. The projected standardised path coefficients for the effect of the moderator on predicting talent retention intention ($\beta = -0.151; p = 0.002$) were significant (see Table 4). Therefore, H7 has supported that job insecurity dampens the positive relationship between talent satisfaction with response strategies and talent retention intention (see Figure 3).
Discussion

Based on the talent management literature in the hospitality sector and drawing on multiple theoretical perspectives such as conservation of resources theory, organisational support theory, and self-determination theory, we proposed a model that aims to identify the most effective pandemic response strategies related to talents’ attitudes of satisfaction, job insecurity, and retention intention. In this vein, three pandemic response strategies, namely, automation services, health and safety, and training support, were found to positively affect talents’ satisfaction with response strategies. In addition, these three essential pandemic response strategies were found to favourably enhance talents’ retention intentions through the mediating role of talents’ satisfaction. These findings confirm prior research that established the link between organisational support and employee satisfaction and retention intention (Ashton, 2017; Koo et al., 2021). For instance, Moncarz et al. (2009) argue that successful training is necessary to retain individuals with long-term goals.

However, the mediated link of talent satisfaction between pandemic response strategies and talent retention intentions was negatively moderated by job insecurity. This implies that high job insecurity would challenge the positive impact of talent satisfaction on

Table 4. Hypothesis-testing summary.

| Hypotheses | Overall sample (n = 310) | p-value | Results |
|------------|--------------------------|---------|---------|
| H1: AUT ---- TSRS | 0.140 | 0.004** | Supported |
| H2: DOW ---- TSRS | 0.074 | 0.080 | Not supported |
| H3: RES ---- TSRS | 0.043 | 0.206 | Not supported |
| H4: HES ---- TSRS | 0.486 | <0.001** | Supported |
| H5: TRN ---- TSRS | 0.171 | <0.001** | Supported |
| H6: TSRS ---- RET | 0.581 | <0.001** | Supported |
| H7: JINS mod TSRS and RET | −0.151* | 0.002** | Supported |

**Critical p-value for two-tailed tests: p < 0.01.

Table 5. Mediation analysis.

| Paths | Path a | Path b | IEF | DE | 95% LL | 95% UL | Decision | Results |
|-------|-------|-------|-----|----|--------|--------|----------|---------|
| M1 = H8.1 TSRS med AUT and TRET | 0.140 | 0.581 | 0.081 | 0.088 | 0.009 | 0.154 | Partial mediation | Supported |
| M2 = H8.2 TSRS med DOW and TRET | 0.074 | 0.581 | 0.043 | 0.084 | −0.030 | 0.116 | No-mediation | Not supported |
| M3 = H8.3 TSRS med RES and TRET | 0.043 | 0.581 | 0.025 | 0.027 | −0.048 | 0.098 | No-mediation | Not supported |
| M4 = H8.4 TSRS med HES and TRET | 0.486 | 0.581 | 0.099 | 0.355 | 0.027 | 0.172 | Partial mediation | Supported |
| M5 = H8.5 TSRS med TRN and TRET | 0.171 | 0.581 | 0.282 | 0.111 | 0.212 | 0.353 | Partial mediation | Supported |

M: Mediator, med: mediates, IEF: Indirect effect, DE: Direct effect, BCI: Bootstrapped Confidence Interval, SE: standard error, LL: lower level, UL: upper level.
their retention intention. This finding is consistent with past research that has shown that job instability has a significant impact on turnover intentions (Koo et al., 2021). In addition, previous studies reported that job insecurity can have a detrimental effect on staff psychological, mental, and physical health—e.g. anxiety and frustration (Chen and Eyoun, 2021; Jung et al., 2021; Koo et al., 2021). On the other hand, this study’s results do not support our hypotheses that suggest that downsizing and restructuring strategies are significantly related to talented satisfaction and retention intention with response strategies. The insignificant impact of the restructuring response strategy on talented satisfaction and retention intention could be due to the fact that restructuring strategies such as reducing costs or eliminating inefficiency are better than quitting the company, since practically every industry was affected by COVID-19, making it difficult for staff to find a new job (Bajrami et al., 2021). In addition, the non-significant association between downsizing strategy and talents’ satisfaction and retention intention could indicate that organisations in their downsizing strategy are not affecting the talented staff due to their outstanding qualities and potential contribution to the competitive advantage of the organisation (Fuentes, 2021; Mai and Thuy, 2021). The following part goes into the theoretical and practical implications.

**Theoretical implications**

Theoretically, this study demonstrates that automation services, health and safety, and training support as pandemic response strategies have a significant direct influence on talent satisfaction. This implies that top management’s reaction to the crisis, in this case, the pandemic, can positively influence their employees’ satisfaction. In this vein, this study adds to the body of knowledge by identifying the firms’ pandemic response plans as major drivers of talent satisfaction. Furthermore, the findings of this study suggest that talent retention is influenced by pandemic response tactics and talent satisfaction. In other words, this research provides a better understanding and emphasis on the applicability of automation services, health and safety, and training support strategies in improving talents’ satisfaction and their subsequent positive role in enhancing talented retention intention. This was confirmed by Ashton (2017), who stated that organisational support, such as a small investment in employee training programs, would result in a significant increase in employee satisfaction, which would have a significant impact on their intention to stay. For example, they revealed that a 1% improvement in work satisfaction can raise the intention to stay by more than 50%. In sum, the study provides an enhanced understanding of talent retention intentions by involving pandemic response strategies (i.e. automation services, health and safety, and training support strategies) and talent satisfaction and job insecurity.

**Practical implications**

The study results provide useful insights for employers in the hospitality industry on the factors that influence talent satisfaction and retention intention during the crisis. In this vein, the results suggest that in order to satisfy and retain talented employees, policymakers and managers in the hospitality industry need to adopt
effective response strategies. For example, hotel authorities are urged to take advantage of automated services during a crisis, such as using artificial intelligence, robots, and digital/automated services. In this regard, services such as Hospitality 5.0, which comprises innovative smart technology including automation, robots, mobile phone technology, augmented reality, and virtual reality, are expected to make hotel operations more efficient and organised and reduce costs, which in turn can enhance talented employee satisfaction. Furthermore, based on the positive association between training support and talented satisfaction and retention intention, hospitality companies are encouraged to offer extensive training programmes to minimise the negative impact of the crisis on talented satisfaction and retention intention. For instance, providing training related to crisis management, minimises damage and safeguards the health of staff and consumers. Additionally, hospitality businesses are also urged to provide guidelines, rules, advice, information, processes, and training to keep personnel healthy and disease-free during a crisis, particularly in the event of COVID-19.

Limitation and future research

There are limitations to every research study, and this one is no different. The generalizability of this study’s findings to Egypt’s 4- and 5-star hotel sector setting is limited because the target sample for this study is Egyptian employees of 4- and 5-star hotels. The utilised data collection tool (i.e. questionnaire) in this study might be further implemented to better grasp the talented employee satisfaction with response methods during COVID-19 in various regional contexts as a plan to compensate for this case and concern for future research. The target sample being limited to 4- and 5-star hotels is another drawback of this study. Similarly, only 4- and 5-star hotels in Egypt are included in the study’s conclusions, leaving out all other accommodation and hospitality establishments. Additionally, rather than conducting this study during a crisis, it might be done under more typical conditions. Longitudinal research is essential in this situation. Last but not least, this study was carried out in Egypt, a developing nation. Greater insights regarding keeping skilled workers during the COVID-19 epidemic may come from a multi-group analysis contrasting developed and less developed countries.

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ORCID iDs

Islam E Salem https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9483-3550
Karam M Ghazi http://orcid.org/0000-0002-8836-8939

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Author Biographies

Islam Elbayouni Salem holds a PhD in Hotel Management from Alexandria University and is an associate professor at the Faculty of Tourism and Hotels, Alexandria University, Egypt, and at the University of Technology and Applied Sciences - Salalah, Oman. His research interests are related to hospitality leadership, hospitality marketing, hospitality technology, hotels’ outsourcing, and Human resources. He has published more papers in scholarly journals, such as Tourism Management, International Journal of Hospitality Management, Sustainable Development, Tourism Management Perspectives, International Journal of Tourism Research, and Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Technology.
Hassan Aided holds a PhD in Tourism and Hospitality from Bournemouth University, UK. He is an Assistant Professor at the University of Technology and Applied Sciences, Salalah, Oman. His research interests are event management, tourism marketing, and hospitality management.

Nasser Alhamar Alkathiri holds a PhD in Business administration from Plymouth University, UK. He is an Assistant Professor at the University of Technology and Applied Sciences, Salalah, Oman. His research interests are Knowledge Management, Knowledge transfer, International, Business, Entrepreneurship, Staff localization. He has published multiple papers in reputed journals indexed in WoS and Scopus (e.g., https://www.springer.com/journal/10916/ Journal of Knowledge Management; International Journal of Finance & Economics).

Karam Mansour Ghazi holds a PhD in hospitality crisis management practices from Alexandria University, Egypt. He is an Associate Professor at the High Institute of Tourism and Hotels in Alexandria (EGOTH), Egypt. His research interests are hospitality crisis management, hotel safety and security, hospitality marketing, hospitality trends, and hospitality online reviews. He has a book and many articles published in hospitality crisis management.