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Hospitality industry has been the hardest hit due to COVID-19: Jacob Peter, Sterling Holiday Resorts

Those adept in creating digital infrastructures and contactless technology features for hotels will have an edge in the job market, believes Jacob Peter, Chief Human Resources Officer at Sterling Holiday Resorts Ltd.



Six months into the COVID-19 pandemic, and there is a cloud of crisis on livelihood. Between April-June 2020, the world lost almost 400 million full-time jobs due to the pandemic, according to statistics released by the International Labour Organization (ILO). The pandemic continues to result in job losses and pay cuts and will lead to many jobs becoming redundant while at the same time, push the creation of newer jobs.

As employers, employees, and economies transform amid the COVID-19 times, it is essential to identify the jobs that will be in demand and help the current and future workforce prepare for them. It's critical for governments, workers, and employers to come and work together to build a sustainable future as we step into the future of work. In an exclusive interaction with People Matters, Jacob Peter, Chief Human Resources Officer at Sterling Holiday Resorts Ltd. shares his thoughts on how COVID-19 has impacted the hospitality industry and its impact on jobs and skilling.

Between April-June 2020, the world lost almost 400 million full-time jobs due to the pandemic, according to statistics released by the International Labour Organization (ILO). India and other South Asian countries have collectively lost 110 million jobs in Q2 of 2020. What do you think are the implications of this for the Indian economy?

The Indian economy has no doubt taken a great beating due to the COVID-19 pandemic, but our markets and industries have always been resilient and shown buoyancy in the toughest of times. Hence, I think that despite the damage that has been caused in the last six months, there will be a slow but steady recovery. The job losses are going to be challenging to manage and ballooning numbers are a point of worry for the Indian economy overall.

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The hospitality industry has also been one of the hardest hit during this pandemic. According to the industry estimates, recently published, the total job losses in the Indian travel and tourism sector since March 25—which is when the lockdown began—are estimated to be around 5.5 million. As a base effect of the impact, a sluggish growth in hospitality is expected in the months to come.

Before the pandemic, India was aiming to hit the \$5 Tn dollar economy mark. Now, it is obviously going to take longer to achieve this goal. According to a recent report by the international management consulting firm Arthur D Little, India may face an opportunity loss of \$1 Tn. With such startling figures, it could take the Indian economy and particularly sectors like ours, a significant amount of time to recover the loss and then bounce back with more.

According to the Indian Association of Tour Operators, loss of opportunities in the hotel, aviation, and travel sector together may amount to an estimated \$85 Bn.

The highly uncertain recovery in the second half of the year will not be enough to go back to pre-pandemic levels, even in the best scenario, warns the ILO. How do you think the hospitality industry will be affected?

The hospitality industry has definitely been the hardest hit sector due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Scores of vendors and service providers such as security agencies, laundry services, and taxi operators have faced a loss of livelihood during these past few months. A lot of these service providers already come from modest income backgrounds; hence, loss of business due to the pandemic has been a double whammy for them. Recovery measures for them would need to be quick and apt.

But signs of revival are gradually appearing because eventually, people will want to move about and travel after months of being cooped up at home. As restrictions on inter-state and intra-state travel are slowly being relaxed, travelers will cautiously venture out and book holidays. The demand however will be put on travel operators, hotels, and resorts to offer safer means and solutions with recognized hygiene and sanitization measures in place.

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Eventually, people will start becoming comfortable with the idea of traveling with new norms; we might even witness a sudden upsurge in numbers.

According to a Curly Tales survey, 74% of respondents stated that their first trip after the lockdown would be to a domestic destination such as Goa. This clearly reflects the innate need for people to break their cycles of monotony and cautiously venture out for leisure.

In the post-pandemic days, there may be jobs that get lost forever. Which jobs do you think in the hospitality industry are more prone to these risks?

Any major crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic tends to cause major shake-ups in the market and redundancies of certain jobs are to be expected. According to the World New Economy Council's survey, two in five respondents think administration-related positions will permanently disappear after the pandemic. One in five think service-related jobs will vanish, followed by some support-related jobs. Less than 10% consider that labor jobs, trainee positions, manager positions, and professional jobs will suffer the same fate.

However, I don't believe this to remain for a long period of time. In a very people intense sector, not having all these services will cause challenges in effective functioning. There will always be the need for housekeeping staff, chefs, janitors, and concierge personnel in a hotel. Having said this, there might be some job losses due to social distancing norms, but I think that up-skilling and reskilling may solve this problem and lead to a minimum loss of jobs.

On the other hand, there are some jobs that can become more important than ever. In fact, a new category of jobs may emerge altogether in the post-pandemic days. What do you think are some of these jobs to be?

Yes, as the pandemic loosens its grip and the travel sector starts to recover, there will be newer roles that come into prominence. For example, the increased focus on hygiene and sanitation will definitely bring about the need for more personnel in these roles. There will also be a massive uptick in jobs related to sales, human resources, hotel designing, revenue management, and marketing.

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And most importantly, those adept in creating digital infrastructures and contactless technology features for hotels will have an edge in the job market. The focus will be on multi-skilled and versatile teams.

As employers, employees and economies transform amid the COVID-19 times, it is essential to identify the jobs that will be in demand and help the current and future workforce prepare for them. What do you think are the skills that are going to gain prominence post-pandemic?

COVID-19 has led to a paradigm shift in the hospitality business. Employers will now undoubtedly look for candidates that are adept at multi-tasking and work well under pressure. In a post-COVID world, the following are the job skills that will be in high demand:

- Creativity and Designing- from Kitchen to Engineering
- Digital Skills in Sales, Reservations, Revenue, IT, and Marketing.
- Financial Reasoning
- AI and Coding for Service Sector
- Frugal Marketing Skills
- Problem Solving
- Crisis Leadership
- Communication Skills
- Critical thinking

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