Sustainability Efforts in Practice in European Hotels: A Tricky Business?

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: This article investigates some tendencies around sustainability work in practice performed during the past five years.

Methodology/Approach: Interviews with hotel managers and staff members, observations on the hotels were conducted. Secondary data material (home pages, guest reviews via websites) has been investigated as document studies.

Findings: The two waves of the pandemic 2020 and 2021 have, on the one hand, offered time for hotel leaders to rethink knowledge about sustainability in their businesses and, on the other hand, taken the focus from sustainability to matters of survival, both physically and economically. Despite financial support from the state for staff retention, many accommodating organisers today are struggling with a staff shortage. The study shows that a few accommodation entrepreneurs have invested wholeheartedly in sustainability measures during the last five years despite the increased social debate about the importance of more sustainable living. The results show some tendencies regarding the practical work for sustainability. Sustainability work has not achieved the desired results in practice due to, among other things, a lack of knowledge, so-called green-washing, disengagement, lack of personnel, financial losses due to pandemics etc.

Research Limitation/Implication: The study makes no claim to statistical representativeness either in the choice of the hotels, their size, geographical location or in any other respect.

Originality/Value of paper: The study consists of 51 interviews of hotel managers performed in 11 European countries.

Category: Research paper

Keywords: hotel; manager; sustainability; practice; understanding the assignment

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

As sustainability demands in our societies are increasing, it arouses curiosity about the effect of its implementation and positioning in the business, not at least within the tourist industry. The tourist industry has been having significant impacts on the global economy. Each year before the pandemic, the number of tourist arrival increased widely and is still slowly doing so in the post-pandemic era. Based on the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC), there was a 3.5% growth for the tourism industry in 2019, bringing a contribution of US$ 8.9 trillion to the world's GDP (WTTC, 2019). In the tourism industry, hospitality was valued at $7.17 trillion in 2016 (WTTC, 2016). The pandemic and several lockdowns have changed the picture, however. During the pandemic, most European countries offered governmental support for the survival of tourist organizations that suffered the loss of customers. This support abled them to keep their staff.

In July 2022, international tourism continued to show vital signs of recovery, with arrivals reaching 57% of pre-pandemic levels in the first seven months of 2022. The steady recovery reflects strong demand for international travel and the easing or lifting of travel restrictions (86 countries had no COVID-19-related restrictions as of 19 September 2022) (UNWTO, 2022). Now it is also the time to rethink tourism, where it is going and how it impacts people and the planet, noticed by UNWTO Secretary-General Zurab Pololikashvili. Europe and the Middle East showed the fastest recovery in January-July 2022, with arrivals reaching 74% and 76% in 2019, respectively. Europe welcomed almost three times as many international arrivals as in the first seven months of 2021 (+190%), boosted by strong intra-regional demand and travel from the United States (UNWTO, 2022). These demands have also created significant operational and workforce challenges in tourism companies and infrastructure, particularly airports, restaurants and hotels. Additionally, the economic situation, exacerbated by the aggression of the Russian Federation against Ukraine, represents a major downside risk. The combination of increasing interest rates in all major economies, rising energy and food prices and the growth prospects of a global recession, as has been indicated by the World Bank, are major threats to the recovery of international tourism through the remainder of 2022 and 2023. The potential slowdown can be seen in the latest UNWTO (2022), which reflects a more cautious outlook and in booking trends showing signs of slower growth (World Bank, 2022; UNWTO, 2022).

One way of working on sustainability in practice at hotels has been Green certification approaches. Since ISO 14001 in 1996 (Boiral et al., 2018), there has been steady growth in certified organizations and the recent trend of decertification (Mosgaard and Kristensen, 2020). In the literature review, Boiral et al. (2018) found that studies tend to focus on the impact of ISO 14001 on

management practices, environmental indicators, environmental awareness and company image. The focus lies on effectiveness and positive aspects (76%) (Erauskin-Tolosa et al., 2019). Boiral et al. (2018) argue that this conceals potential undesirable effects such as bureaucracy, organizational resistance, cost of implementation, lack of resources and commitment from managers (Boiral et al., 2018). Several recent studies question the overall impact of environmental certification schemes: symbolic adoption of schemes, the impact on environmental performance and integration into the organizational climate (e.g. Boiral et al., 2018; Heras-Saizarbitoria, Boiral and de Junguitu, 2020; Testa, Boiral and Iraldo, 2015). Other studies indicate that there may be problematic issues relating to certifications (e.g. Valenciano-Salazar et al., 2021).

Green certifications are a third-party organization's acknowledgement that a hotel abides by a set of environmental standards and continually strives to have a positive environmental impact. Green certifications are developed by private and public agencies worldwide. LEED, Green Seal, and Green Key are some of the most recognized green certifications for hotels. Many hotels hope these certifications will attract more customers, leading to higher hotel bookings, room prices, and revenues. However, several studies have not been able to confirm this connection. Many more and different parameters influence customers' choice of accommodation (Chong and Verma, 2013; Walsman, Verma and Muthulingam, 2014). Studies also investigate why hotels do not prioritize investing in green labels. Environmental protection is not the primary consideration of consumers seeking accommodations. Lack of support by investment owners (shareholders) and lack of relevant subsidy incentives are often mentioned as reasons. In the hotel and tourism field, though, consumers' understanding of the sustainable development of hotels is also increasing (Verma and Chandra, 2018).

Since the hospitality industry includes so many different areas, this study focuses on the accommodation industry in European countries seen through interviews with 51 hotel managers in 11 countries. Through these impacts, it is interesting to learn profoundly about the sustainable perspectives of business owners, managers and the staff. As a result, this perspective leads to some research questions; How do the managers understand the demands on sustainability in their businesses? How do they feel about implementing sustainability issues? What is the driving force in practical work towards more sustainable accommodation businesses? This article investigates some tendencies around sustainability work in practice performed during the past five years in hotel accommodations in several European countries.

2   THE THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

2.1   Understanding the Assignment and Understanding Responsibilities towards Sustainable Practice

Sustainable world?

During the last decades, have undoubtedly environmental problems, e.g. pollution, deforestation and desertification, become real to us all. The environmental threats are consequences of the exploitation of Nature.

Those threats, together with structural changes in manufacturing and production of goods and services, i.e. how we live and consume, show that we still have huge environmental challenges ahead of us (Hahn et al., 2014; Gullikson and Holmgren, 2015; Thurén, 2015). Sustainability is a well-used term, appearing almost daily in the media and increasingly in everyday conversation, often described as something good to strive for. Moving towards a more sustainable way of living will inevitably require radical changes in attitudes, values and behaviours (Hahn et al., 2014; Gullikson and Holmgren, 2015).

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) has become an established part of business practice in recent times. It is expressed that improved regulations, benefits as increased market shares, enhanced brand reputation, better employee retention rates, etc. are all attracting companies to CSR (Abaeian, Yeoh and Khong, 2014). Hotel business is strongly linked to the surrounding environment and the society in which they operate. The growth of the hotel industry can benefit local communities (Serra-Cantallops et al., 2017). This ables positive attitudes and can help to minimize harmful impacts on the environment and society. The ultimate goal for a business should be sustainability even though it is often interpreted as long-term profitability (Van Marrewijk, 2003).

Moreover, perhaps the best way to strive for sustainability is through organizational change initiatives (Appelbaum et al., 2016a). There have been discussions about the definition of sustainable development (Rambaud and Richard, 2015; Appelbaum et al., 2016a; Oxenswärdh, 2017), about how to interpret the concept in organizations and companies (Hahn et al., 2014; Appelbaum et al., 2016b; Oxenswärdh, 2018, 2020). Also research about how companies can create measures to get facts for decisions has been conducted. For instance, the Triple-Bottom-Line (TBL), created by Elkington in the 1990s, is nowadays a well-known concept that many organizations use (Slaper and Hall, 2011).

According to Naess (1995), the essential ideas informing an environmental worldview can be broadly shared without prescribing or predetermining ultimate premises or specific interpretations and actions. We need plural interpretations and actions appropriate to local cultures and conditions – echoing the ecological principle of diversity in unity. Paradoxically a sustainable worldview yields many different views of the same thing. The result of the Brundtland

Commission created challenges for countries and corporations. Corporate managers and other leaders in organizations have to make decisions in their companies and organizations with economic, environmental and social considerations, which is to some extent paradoxical and complex (Hahn et al., 2014).

Sustainability is a normative concept referring to an ideal state of being in which humans can flourish within the ecological thresholds of the planet alongside other living entities for perpetuity (Rockström et al., 2009).

Sustainability is not an end state that can be achieved but a moving target continuously changing and improving (Gaziulusoy, Boyle and McDowall, 2013). This dynamic state exists within thresholds, defined by the planetary boundaries framework, or the safe operating space for humanity (Rockström et al., 2009; Steffen et al., 2015). Seen from a systems perspective, sustainability is the ability of systems to persist, adapt, transform or transition in the face of constantly changing conditions.

2.2   Understanding the Assignment and Responsibilities

Responsibility is a word and a concept that is increasingly being mentioned in our society, not least when we are talking about matters of sustainability. It is pointed out how important it is, in any organizational context, to develop co-workers into responsible actors. In the scientific sense, the concept of responsibility is, first and foremost, a philosophical question. Philosophy and responsibility are interconnected on the one hand in the general question of what responsibility possibly is and on the other side of the normative question: what responsibility should be? (Kernell, 2002)

There is a certain dynamic between individuals, groups and organizations. Responsibility in any organizational context can be described as a relationship between the commissioner and the actor. Relations of responsibility constitute the arena where both the exaction and the assumption of responsibility can occur. Responsibility/accountability is a crucial question in all organizations working towards sustainability. Issues of accountability consequently have a direct relationship with professional development in organizations. An essential part of the organization's assignment is to assume responsibility. Different actors can understand both the assignment and the responsibility in different ways. This can be described in terms of the understanding of assignment and responsibility. The actors' understanding and interpretation of the assignment are significant for how they assume responsibility for fulfilling what they are commissioned to do. The understanding includes the cognitive and psychological processes and shows how the assumption of responsibility can be shaped (Abrahamsson and Andersen, 2005; Oxenswärdh, 2011).

When the understanding of responsibility describes what happens to the professionals and leads to heightened competence, the concept of responsibility can also be viewed as a pedagogical concept. The understanding of assignment

and responsibility can thus be regarded as a learning process, which is essential for the active assumption of responsibility. This learning process is integral to the organization staff's competence and professional development. These understanding processes can be seen as part of the collective learning process (Oxenswärdh, 2011, 2018). The process of understanding one's responsibility is, however, a more unexplored concept – unlike understanding the mission – and it has to do with the operator's approach in question the nature of the professional obligation to consider themselves obliged on assignment.

To illustrate the difference between the terms, it would be quite possible to find cases where assignments understanding of a co-worker is high, i.e. it is a clear picture of the tasks they believe the decision maker expects to be implemented. Despite this understanding, responsibility taking can be low, i.e. a number of different – e.g. moral/ethical/cultural – causes may hamper the actor's accountability to carry out the assignment. One way to express the distinction between mission understanding and the responsibility of understanding is to assume that the former rests on the legal and the latter on legitimate grounds. Concepts of legality and legitimacy disclose relations between justice and morality. Legality focuses on social actions in a formal sense and is sanctioned by the state or corporations, e.g. by orders and rules of law. Legitimacy is the more unspoken value system that has nothing to do with the formal legal system but rests on ethical foundations (Oxenswärdh, 2011, 2018). At the mission's core, understanding exists, seemingly even understanding responsibility. Responsibility understanding is formed at the core of an actor's competencies. Thus, it is further emphasized that actors' responsibilities also include understanding the approach to change and development. Change towards more sustainable practice needs both perspectives in the organizational context.

2.3   Co-creation of Values

Sustainability can be seen as a value we co-create in groups and teams. The creation or co-creation of values are two concepts often used in business and management literature and research. Today's consumers can be regarded as co-producers, creating meaning for the products, and at the same time, their consumption can be seen as an identification marker. Furthermore, this process adds sense to the development and makes the active customers participants in the product experience. This, again, transforms consumers into co-creators of values. (Bergman and Klefsjö, 2020). The relationship between the customer and the product provider can also be transferred to describe the relationship between several entrepreneurs and stakeholders working in groups or networking with each other or other actors. In this relationship, the project owner, the entrepreneur, invites partners into the learning process, offering them real-life challenges and continuously following up on the process (Oxenswärdh, 2018, 2020).

Co-creation of values emerges in practice, including processes of both individual and collective art. Both meaning-making and sense-making are seen as processes involved within the interaction between members of the team/group. Psychology describes meaning-making as a process through which people construe, understand, or make sense of life events, relationships, and themselves (Ignelzi, 2000). The method of meaning-making helps retain, reaffirm, revise or replace elements of a person's orienting system towards more nuanced, complex, and valuable (e.g., Gillies, Neimeyer, and Milman, 2014; Gadenne et al., 2012). The term is widely used in constructivist approaches and educational psychology (Ignelzi, 2000; Mortimer and Scott, 2003).

One way to create value between two different parties, e.g. entrepreneurs and their customers and stakeholders, is to pursue sustainability in practice. Value creation can lead to more viable tourism practices, thus contributing to a sustainable society. This does not happen without participation in collective and collaborative learning, meaning and sense-making, and knowledge sharing, where learning can occur.

These processes can be considered a framework for understanding the complexity of innovative problem-solving in sustainability issues in any group context. It is also assumed, in this article, that the creation of the values is a learning journey. To implement values in an organisation, it is necessary to tag on to collaborative culture. The design of collaborative culture requires creative thinking in solving problems, leadership, knowledge management, experiential learning, communication, quality management, and continuous improvement in an organisation (Roser, DeFillippi and Samson, 2013).

2.4 Managers and Management for Sustainability

For organisations to attain sustainable development and adapt to planned and unplanned changes, they primarily depend upon the competencies of their leaders and the collective competence of members. Research suggests sustainability leadership capabilities and a holistic perspective on the complexities of embedded organisations (Lozano, 2012; Metcalf and Benn, 2013). Maintaining a holistic perspective requires managing large amounts of complex information. (Metcalf and Benn, 2013). Several systems have been designed to monitor different organisational processes by incorporating sustainability at the strategic level. In management control research, a consensus has emerged over a long time on the importance of applying a holistic perspective, especially regarding how management control contributes to the realisation and development of organisations' strategies and goals. This holistic perspective has been labelled Management Control System (MCS). With the emphasis on systems, proponents of this approach argue that one should not study management control by focusing only on individual parts, such as e.g. a budget process. Instead, one should consider its various parts, financial as well as non-financial, that together constitute a control system (Nilsson and Olve, 2022). MCS are to contribute to

the development of an organisation, the various components of it should harmonise with each other. In research on management control and sustainable development, various theoretical concepts are used as the basis for analysis. For example, MCS as a package (Lueg and Radlach, 2016), sustainability control systems (Gond et al., 2012), environmental management control systems (Guenther, Endrikat and Guenther, 2016), environmental management accounting (Burrit and Schaltegger, 2010) and levers of eco-controls (Journeault, De Rongé and Henri, 2016). It is advocated (e.g. Gond et al., 2012; Lueg and Radlach, 2016) that there is a need to strengthen the link from management control theory into practice if sustainability is to be integrated into existing MCS. Otherwise, there is a risk that Sustainability Control Systems (SCS) and MCS exist parallel and with little influence on an organisation's sustainability strategies.

On the other hand, if used appropriately, MCS may push organisations toward sustainability (Guenther, Endrikat and Guenther, 2016). Leaders must maintain a long-term focus (Boiral et al., 2018) by incorporating different viewpoints and allowing decentralised decision-making in their operations (Wong, Ormiston and Tetlock, 2011). Leaders in organisations are considered to be the most crucial change agents responsible for bringing constructive changes in working toward sustainability. Further on, leaders must be proactive in bridging the gaps between implementing various strategic decisions, management roles, and organisational changes. Leaders must have competence and knowledge endowed with vision and innovative approaches to guide, encourage, motivate, counsel, appraise, and reward employees to fulfil the needed change processes. Furthermore, sustainable development embraces business, economic, environmental, and social dimensions (Gladwin, Kennelly and Shelomith Kause, 1995). Competent and effective leadership is essential to achieve sustainable development in the context of complex and challenging adaptive changes. Preparation for future contingencies is the primary job of leaders. They have to provide clear directions and lead the team so they can win their team's support to achieve the organisation's common goals. They also have to bring technological and adaptive changes to the organisation for sustainability. Furthermore, and not least, because sustainability can be seen as a value, ethical competence by leaders is of crucial importance (Ferdig, 2007). Management scholars have recognised that the complexity of highly interdependent systems necessitates a systems approach, viewing social systems nested within natural systems (Gladwin, Kennelly and Shelomith Kause, 1995).

To summarise the section above, it can be stated that there are different processes within a learning journey for organizations to adopt more sustainable practices. There is a need for knowledge sharing over the facts on sustainability issues throughout the organization. Processes of understanding sustainability demand as an assignment and understanding the responsibilities within are essential in organizations in starting the work towards more sustainable practice. Furthermore, the process of co-creation of values must not stand only inside and

among own organization as an internal concern but also include all stakeholders. To lead these processes, there is a need for leadership with a strong commitment to change management. Knowledge of these processes is of immense importance in any organization to avoid the so-called window-dressing function or to greenwash sustainability issues.

3   METHODOLOGY

This study has a qualitative and an exploratory approach with thematic content analysis as a method. The study aimed to capture insights into the practical sustainability work within the accommodation business. The data collection consists of 51 one-hour interviews with hotel managers in 11 European countries. Also, some staff members were spontaneously interviewed shortly at the locations. Furthermore, observations were conducted during the visits. The study does not claim statistical representativeness of the hotels' sustainability work in general but instead describes some tendencies in work towards sustainability in randomly selected hotels.

Data collection took place between March and May 2022. Countries in which the survey was conducted were: Germany, Holland, Belgium, France, Italy, Greece, Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary, Slovakia and Poland. The selected hotels in these countries differed in number, size, organizational form and geographical location. Among the hotels surveyed were representatives from large international hotel chains to small family-owned hotels from big cities to rural areas. The study includes 51 hotels, conducting 51 one-hour interviews with hotel managers, shorter 5-15 minutes interviews with some staff members, on-site observation, and a review of various documents and information on websites and other documents about the hotels' operations.

An interview guide was constructed and was divided into the following themes/areas of questions: personal background (upbringing, including educational background, language skills, etc.), questions about the hotel (org. size, number of staff, years as a leader, development measures, etc.; sustainability (including questions such as what it is, what has been done in practice, how has the staff been trained, future plans for more sustainable operations, cooperation with other actors, what kind of help is desired, etc.). Observations were conducted by the researcher staying overnight at the hotels investigated. This abled observation and gathered knowledge of the room conditions and insight into the daily work towards sustainability at the hotel. Also, some shorter interviews were conducted with other personnel at the hotels. A total of 188 people were interviewed, consisting the number of interviewees ranged between three and seven people per hotel. Interviews included questions about what it was like to work at the hotel. How did they experience the leadership? How did they work towards sustainability? The secondary data material was gathered from hotels' web pages, guest reviews and printed documents on-site. This data material was analysed using theoretical concepts such as sustainability, mission

and responsibility understanding, leadership and value creation. Research questions on the data material consisted following themes: What is sustainability for respondents? How do they perceive the requirements for more sustainable hotel operations? How are the sustainability requirements implemented in practice? How is the staff trained in sustainability, and which processes are used to collaborate with customers and other actors? What can be read out about the leadership towards sustainability? This is a study with an exploratory purpose, i.e. how some hotels choose to prioritize or not work towards more sustainability by performing specific changes in their processes. The respondents' answers were then analysed using an abductive approach. Thematic content analysis based on the questions/themes requested and the theoretical concepts presented in the study were alternated. Ethical considerations: all hotels and their leaders and staff members interviewed are anonymized in this study.

4   PRESENTATION, ANALYSE AND INTERPRETATION OF THE RESULTS

In the following section answers from the 51 interviews with hotel managers, results from staff interviews and observations, and secondary data material is presented, analysed and interpreted.

4.1   Interviews with Hotel Managers

Firstly, there is an account of the compilation of results from questions on facts about the hotels, staff, the managers' years of service, educational background and language skills. Then questions about sustainability will be reported. Furthermore, the answers regarding the practical implementation and measures the hotels in question have implemented in terms of sustainability are explained. Finally, results that concern the measures that remain in the hotel's sustainability work are analysed.

The hotels included in the study were of different sizes, had several profiles, and were located in different geographical spots in eleven European countries. In total, 51 hotels were included in the study. On average, they had 50.6 rooms. The number of rooms varied between six and 161 rooms. Most of the hotels were family-owned. About 25% of the hotels had joined or had a franchising agreement with larger hotel chains, such as, e.g. Best Western and Hilton etc. Most of the hotels can be classified as three or four-star hotels. However, approximately 75% of this study were four-star hotels. One of the accommodations was a nunnery. Among the hotels were two castles. Countries including this study and the number of hotels in every country investigated: Italy (11), Slovakia (2), France (12), Poland (4), Greece (7), Holland (3), Germany (4), Romania (2), Belgium (2), Hungary (2) and Bulgaria (2). In total, 51 hotels in 11 countries were part of this study.

4.1.1 Age, gender, schooling and language skills of managers

Most leaders were between 50 and 60 years old. Regarding the percentage of the different age groups, the following results were prominent in the group of leaders. Age between 21-30 varied 13%, age between 31-40 varied 13%, age between 41-50 varied 16%, age between 51-60 varied 39% and age between 61-70 varied 19%. The respondents' gender distribution was 58% male and 42% female. The educational background of the leaders was 80% university degrees. Only 20% of the leaders had only a high school education or less. University studies were mostly about subjects as economics and administration; however, several managers had studied hotel business and management. Not all leaders could speak foreign languages, but the majority knew, on average, two other languages in addition to their mother tongue.

4.1.2 About the development of the businesses during the past five years

The time respondents have been working as managers of the hotels varies from 44 years to two months. If calculated the average years of service for these by removing the respondents with only two months in the hotel's service, the average number of years in service as a hotelier is 15.7 years. Development of hotel businesses over the last five years also varies greatly, not least due to the pandemic period. Regarding the development of these companies, the leaders state that during the past five years, including the years with the pandemic, the businesses have mostly grown and had good returns.

Nevertheless, a minority of leaders complain that they have bad finances and have to struggle with various things, most problems seeming to be caused by a lack of staff. All these hotels have received government financial assistance for staff costs during the pandemic. However, several managers testify that the personnel never returned after the pandemic. They chose to retrain, study or move abroad, etc. Approximately 19% of respondents' report that their finances are so bad that they consider selling their business. These businesses have not reinvested the profits in the hotels for several years in a row, are facing significant renovation needs and profile changes, and are unable to meet customer expectations. Some others have considered selling for other reasons. Their businesses, primarily family-owned, have no successors, even though it is believed that the business is excellent. Most leaders and hotel owners kept working at the hotels during the pandemic. Some were planning for future changes, and others were conducting significant renovations. Only a few of these 51 leaders stayed at home during the pandemic. Some of the hotels' staff offered their services during the pandemic even though they did not need to. Some came and renovated locations with their managers, and others took care of gardens, etc. They showed solidarity with their employers and wanted to do something during the day for their wages. The study shows that these hotels have had fewer staff members falling off than the other hotels.

These answers show that most leaders, with a few exceptions, have long experience as leaders in the hotel industry. Their level of education seems to be relatively high, but mostly in administration and economy-related subjects.

This fact also shows their main focus when managing their businesses. They are primarily involved in the financial management of the company. During the pandemic, most managers have worked continuously with various tasks. Several of them testify that they were given an opportunity and time for reflection under the lockdowns, which enabled them to think more holistically and reflect on their operations. This also allowed them to make new plans for the future. Several leaders commented that during the lockdowns, they were better off financially as the state paid the costs of the staff's salaries.

4.1.3   Sustainability

In this section, the responses to sustainability issues are presented. The following research questions have been guiding the interpretation of responses. What is sustainability for respondents? How do they perceive the requirements for more sustainable hotel operations? How are the sustainability requirements implemented in practice? How is the staff trained in sustainability, and which processes are used to collaborate with customers and other actors? What can be read out about the leadership towards sustainability?

There have been many discussions over the interpretation of the meaning of the concept of sustainability. There are as many answers as there are respondents. Many managers in this study refer to this question, naturally, by refereeing to their businesses. They are talking about ecological sustainability by pointing out the importance of thinking about energy and water use in their hotels. Many respondents also highlight the importance of thinking economically. Some managers are thinking about their behaviours and relate these to sustainable living by talking about how they have already changed their own behaviours. They are now cycling to work, sharing their car, not using too much energy, etc. Most hotel managers are aware of the four pillars of sustainability. However, only one is also talking about the ethical matters within the issue. Hotels' geographical location is also a factor which has been the eye opener for several managers: if there is a severe water shortage, hot climate etc., in the resort, it is often those things respondents take up with the interview. They are apprehensive over this and the implications of that to their economy.

4.1.4   How do hotels perceive the requirements for more sustainable hotel operations, and how are these implemented in practice?

About 20% of these hotels are connected to some certification system (e.g. Green Key or other systems) which also require sustainability measures. These hotels connected to these certification systems follow the regulations regularly and are evaluated by them. The others are working on more or less individual measures for sustainability. These can be about saving water/towels/electricity, demands printed through different kinds of signs and calls to action at the hotels. In addition, all hotels comply with the local authority requirements for more

sustainable handling of garbage, food waste, etc. All countries have regulations for hotels on the national level. They vary from country to country (e.g., France state is demanding that hotels reclassify their businesses every five years.They also ask for things to be done regarding sustainability issues). Half of the hotels seem to be in the process of improving their operations to become more sustainable. They change lamps and switch to water-saving toilets and showers. They have garbage sorting bins and use ecological cleaning methods and detergents. They make advertisements for local food and tours. They are planning charge stations for electric cars – the other half of the hotels' act is based on the external requirements for sustainability. The leaders desire, last but not least, more green technology.

4.1.5   How is the staff trained in sustainability, and which processes are used in collaboration with customers and other actors?

Only a handful of managers state that they involve the staff in the sustainability work other than assigning this as an additional assignment. They have not given them any training in sustainability knowledge and measures. According to the leaders, what is challenging is high staff turnover, lack of language skills, and young untrained and seasonal employees. Time is spent introducing the staff to the main work causing there is no time to train them in sustainability. The hotel managers also address their lack of knowledge on the subject. The time during the pandemic was not used for continuing sustainability measures, although many were renovating and planning other future operations. The managers explained this as something that was not prioritized as the fate of the entire business was uncertain. Some leaders expressed the need to find strategies to train their staff. The knowledge and desire to do so existed, but the know-how to fulfil the assignment was missing. Some others expressed that it was challenging to train the staff as they were used to the old working methods.

The guests' response to sustainability measures varies, according to the manager's statements and guest reviews on the websites. Some guests demand more sustainability measures, and others see this as a loss of the comforts and habits they are used to while visiting the hotels. The unreasonable sustainability requirements include, e.g. demand for the use of local products all year round, even though access to these is seasonal. The statements show that hotel guests have become more aware of sustainability while travelling. It seems to be the small, often family-owned hotels with the most environmentally and sustainable-conscious guests. As for other actors and stakeholders, managers expressed increased cooperation with municipalities and suppliers. Managers wanted a holistic approach to sustainability, and all processes should be sustainable. There are also good examples in this study among the leaders who work closely with surrounding society and the various actors. These managers promote local foods, a clean environment, and cultural and natural experiences for their hotel guests.

4.1.6 What can be read out about the managers' leadership towards sustainability?

In terms of leadership, managers can be divided into three major groups. A group of leaders clearly showed their commitment and were able to engage their staff in all processes at the hotel. They involved the staff in all plans, had clear goals for the business, and gave the staff some freedom, education and trust but also shared responsibilities among them. These leaders seemed to be sympathetic and forward-looking. They had a holistic view of the businesses. The second group seemed to be tied to the owners or regulations of the hotel. They did not involve the staff in the planning process but demanded a response by issuing orders. They behaved like marionette puppets without any own initiative in fulfilling the assignment. The third group consisted of leaders who had somehow given up their mission as leaders and apparently only administered the business. They had no foresight, no development or sustainability plans. Some of these managers planned their retirement, and others the business sale or administered the business only to collect the profit.

4.2 Interviews with the Staff Members

The hotel staff were interviewed through short, spontaneous meetings inside the locations. Questions included: How was it to work at the hotel? How was the leadership perceived? How did they work towards sustainability?

The majority of the answers reflect well the reality that could be observed in the hotels. Almost everyone complained about the heavy workload, lack of colleagues, the fast pace, and the lack of time for their duties. Many worked in several parts of the business: they served breakfast, cleaned the rooms, and worked at the reception or room service. There were also hotel staff who were satisfied with their workplaces. They expressed their contentment by saying they had good colleagues and used to help each other. The interviews revealed a significant staff turnover at most hotels, many new employees with poor language skills, lack of industry experience, and short-term employment contracts. The employees' knowledge and cultural backgrounds seemed to cause workplace problems. In the same work team, e.g. a low-educated boat refugee from Africa worked with a highly-educated war refugee from Ukraine.

The leadership was perceived as deficient by approximately 75% of the respondents. The reasons were the leadership's strictness, savings requirements, control measures, poor working conditions and low wages. Others expressed their gratitude for long and safe employment, leaders with whom they had a good relationship and were trusted. The result was poor in terms of knowledge and actual work towards sustainability. Only 10% of all respondents had good knowledge of sustainability in practice. They worked in hotels where it could also be observed that most measures for sustainability were already in use. The 90% again had a varied amount of knowledge about sustainability, everything from what it is to some showing a sign with a request not to leave the towel on the floor if you were thinking about sustainability issues as a guest.

4.3   The Secondary Data Material

4.3.1   Hotels' webpages

Guest reviews and on-site printed documents were studied to maintain more business information. The hotels in question had different types of websites. Some had only their own website with a booking system, while others used several international booking sites. The design of the web pages was of different quality but still contained the same facts about the business. Systems of the guests' reviews were also built up in a general way. They contain questions about amenities in the rooms, breakfast, restaurants, hotel location, length of stay, and the staff's treatment of the guests. They may include some empty answer boxes where the guests could write in some other issues. Nevertheless, none of these 51 hotels had questions about experiences regarding the hotel's sustainability work, not even the hotels that had otherwise progressed with their sustainability work. Sustainability issues were, though, visible on the hotels' websites, brochures, and various signs around the hotels, especially with the hotels that were part of some of the certification systems.

4.4   Observations at the Hotels

Observations at the hotels were carried out during the visits, which varied in length between 1 to 5 days. During the visit, external and internal facilities were observed, consisting of the physical spaces, the rooms, shared facilities, breakfast room, restaurant, gym, pool, parking facilities, garage, etc. Furthermore, the ongoing processes at the hotels were observed, e.g. how the reception, the cleaning, and the service in the different parts of the hotel worked. Physical spaces varied in appearance, size, equipment, condition and furnishings from one hotel to another. All the hotels visited had their breakfast room, approx. 80% of the hotels also had their restaurant. In addition, several hotels could have separate bars, gyms, garages, swimming pools, souvenir shops, conference rooms, etc. The maintenance of the hotels varied greatly. It was visible in several places (six of 51 hotels) how the hotels had stopped developing and only seemed to fix the absolute essentials to keep their business afloat. These hotels had significant renovation needs in all their premises, not least the rooms. The staff was reduced to a minimum, and the restaurant only served a light breakfast with cheap, mass-produced products.

5   CONCLUSION

The study shows that a few accommodation entrepreneurs have invested wholeheartedly in sustainability measures during the last five years despite the increased social debate about the importance of more sustainable living. In the study, 51 managers were interviewed in 11 different European countries. The results show some tendencies regarding the practical work for sustainability. In general, sustainability work has not achieved the desired results in practice due

to, among other things, a lack of knowledge, so-called greenwashing, disengagement, lack of personnel, financial losses due to pandemics etc. However, the study also shows good examples of entrepreneurs who have implemented significant changes in their organisations through active path choices, investments and knowledge acquisition and dissemination of it to their staff.

In the following, some challenges and possibilities are lifted due to this study of 51 European hotels and their work towards sustainability. The biggest challenge based on this study is the lack of knowledge about sustainability in practice. To absorb the knowledge, one must understand the task and its responsibilities (Abrahamsson and Andersen, 2005; Oxenswärdh, 2011). It is even more critical for leaders to understand this when communicating and interpreting sustainability goals with their staff.

This also requires systems thinking skills. This work can advantageously begin by defining what sustainability is in one's organisation. What can it mean in practice? Which system parts should it include, and which processes can be distinguished and worked with towards sustainability? (Rambaud and Richard, 2015; Appelbaum et al., 2016a; Oxenswärdh, 2017). For this purpose, a continuous learning process should be organised for the entire staff (Oxenswärdh, 2011, 2018; Naess, 1995; Gaziulusoy, Boyle and McDowall, 2013). Furthermore, sustainability can be seen as a value we co-create in groups and teams. A more systematic learning and innovation processes for value creation are needed, a change into a more practical work towards sustainable measures (Davison at al., 2014). Firstly, companies must incorporate sustainability into their vision to improve sustainability performance. It requires knowledge of why and how to incorporate it, then translating its overall objective into specific sustainability practices for each performance area. Finally, there is a need to control and measure indicators to assess achievement for each area (Gadenne et al. 2012). In sum, it is essential to start with knowing your system and learning from others. Work with your staff in constant collaboration and involve other stakeholders in sustainability work. It also requires courage to demand sustainable solutions with your suppliers and other stakeholders. Successful and well-founded sustainability work can enable an increased influx of customers and counteract so-called greenwashing. The hotels need to network with other hotels, not least, it would be fruitful to collaborate and learn from each other about sustainability measures in practice. Lastly, since many leaders are not professional change agents, it would be essential to develop leaders as change agents to manage a change process towards more sustainable practice successfully. A mature understanding of sustainability management requires adopting a multidisciplinary systemic lens capable of appreciating the interconnectivity of economic, political, social, ecological and ethical issues across temporal and spatial dimensions.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST