

Innovative Synergy: Successful Cooperation of Enterprises in the Hotel Industry

[Inovatívna synergia: úspešná spolupráca podnikov v hotelovom priemysle]

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Abstract: The hotel industry is constantly changing and evolving, and one of the key factors for success in this competition is the ability to innovate and collaborate. Innovative synergy is a process in which two or more businesses work together to create value that they would not achieve on their own. In the hotel industry, this connection can be membership in professional associations or hotel chains. The main goal of the presented article is to evaluate the cooperation of companies in the hotel industry and to identify the advantages/disadvantages and effects of synergy of companies in the context of the hotel industry. This goal will be achieved through several key elements of analysis and evaluation that will consider current trends, practices and opportunities within the field. Based on the results of our primary research, we can conclude that most members in professional associations/hotel chains have sufficient awareness of the activities of their members, which points to the development of these activities within the given professional association/hotel chain. The second finding is the fact that member businesses are aware of and benefit from the benefits that make membership in professional associations/hotel chains an important tool for supporting and strengthening the competitiveness of hotel businesses.

Keywords: hotel chain, hotel industry, innovative synergy, partnerships in hotels, professional associations.

JEL classification: L83, 032, Z32

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Introduction

Tourism is an important part of the hotel industry, as it represents a significant source of income for hotels and other categories of accommodation facilities. Tourism attracts visitors to various destinations, while visitors need basic tourism services – transport, accommodation and catering and other, additional tourism services that hotels and other categories of accommodation facilities provide in their product portfolio. Lodging establishments benefit from the increased visibility and promotion that tourism brings, as well as the economic growth and job creation that tourism can generate.

In today's dynamic and competitive context of the hotel industry, it becomes obvious that classic procedures are no longer enough to maintain and develop a business. The key to success is innovative synergy through effective cooperation between companies in the hotel market. This strategy not only opens the way to new possibilities, but also stimulates the emergence of innovations, thereby strengthening competitiveness and creating significant added values in the hotel industry.

Collaboration between businesses in the hotel market can bring a number of benefits, including increased revenue, better customer satisfaction and the ability to offer a wider and more varied range of services (Wilke, Costa, De Lamônica Freire & Ferreira 2019). We consider the biggest advantage of the cooperation of companies in the hotel market to be an increase in income. When hotels work together, they can pool their available resources (financial and human

capital) to leverage marketing promotion to increase hotel traffic through promotions, service packages offered, and more. When hotels cooperate with each other, they can offer a wider range of services, such as spa treatments, fitness facilities and recreational activities. This can improve the guest experience and create a memorable stay, which can lead to increased loyalty and repeat business. By working together, hotels can also share best practices and learn from each other, leading to continuous improvement in service and customer satisfaction (Camisón, Forés, Boronat-Navarro & Puig-Denia 2020).

Hotel market and synergy between businesses

According to the Decree of the Ministry of Economy of the Slovak Republic No. 277/2008 Coll., which entered into force in 2008 and ended its operation in 2021, establishes classification features for accommodation facilities when classifying them into categories and classes. A hotel can be defined as an establishment whose main activity is providing accommodation facilities to the actual traveler along with food, beverages and sometimes recreational facilities on a fee basis (TourismNotes 2023). Economic indicators as well as social significance play an important role in accommodation facilities (Kopšo 1989). Hospitality is a multidimensional area of hospitality focused on providing a wide range of services related to accommodation and a comfortable stay for travelers and tourists (Ryan 2015). We define the hotel industry as a unit of the tourism industry, which collectively procures the operation of accommodation and catering facilities with the aim of satisfying the needs of customers, which also include hotels and other types of accommodation facilities (Hrubalová 2015).

Kosmák (2005) defines a hotel network as a certain number of hotels interconnected by a common hotel brand, while the hotel's connection to the network is not usually based on the use of ownership rights to tangible assets, but rather the use of licensing rights to intangible assets, the network does not have legal personality. The emergence of hotel chains is stimulated in several ways, which differ in the management of hotels and the degree of control, based on franchising contracts, ownership relationships, voluntary associations, as well as the provision of real estate leases (Hrubalová 2015, Ivanova & Ivanov 2015). Integrated hotel networks characterize hotels that are owned or leased by a hotel company, due to which they lose their independence and strengthen their relationships. They are financially more expensive forms, considering the purchase or construction of a new hotel as well as the actual rental of the building for operating the hotel. The lease agreement includes points such as ensuring building maintenance related to wear and tear, as well as the amount of rent and monthly instalments (Kosmák 2008).

The advantages of belonging to a hotel chain include resource sharing, centralized management and operational procedures, as well as increased brand visibility in the market. However, belonging to a chain can also have challenges, such as standards and procedures set centrally and financial costs. The decision on affiliation should take into account a thorough analysis of advantages and disadvantages, and an evaluation of whether this strategy corresponds to the goals of a particular hotel (Rhou & Singal 2020, Sainaghi 2006, Such-Devesa & Mendieta-Peñalver 2013).

Inter-organizational hotel cooperation is an important aspect in the modern hotel industry, where competition is increasing and customer expectations are growing. This form of cooperation allows hotels to share resources, experience and know-how in order to achieve synergies and improve their competitiveness (Nieves & Segarra-Ciprés 2015, Zehrer & Hallmann 2015). Typical forms of interorganizational cooperation include sharing resources such as infrastructure and equipment, joint marketing and advertising activities, and mutual

referrals and referrals between hotels. These forms of collaboration can lead to better performance and efficiency for individual hotels and the industry as a whole. It is important for hotel organizations to carefully examine and select appropriate partnerships and forms of cooperation in order to maximize their potential and gain competitive advantage in the market (Casanueva, Gallego & Revilla 2015; Safonov, Hall & Prayag 2023).

With their boom in the hotel industry, accommodation establishments contribute to mutual cooperation, which is developed within national and international associations and unions. At the international level (the EU), we know the Confederation of National Associations of Hotels, Restaurants, Cafés and Similar Establishments in the European Union and European Economic Area (HOTREC). Its mission is to act as a platform for European hospitality and tourism associations, supporting the key role of the hospitality and tourism industry in Europe. It acts as a forum for the exchange of information and helps promote a regulatory framework and business environment in which they can bring the most value to European society and the economy. Its mission is to represent and defend the interests of the company vis-à-vis the European Union and international institutions, as well as all interested parties, as well as to promote the exchange of knowledge and best practices among its members in order to further promote innovation (HOTREC 2023).

We include the International Hotel & Restaurant Association (IH&RA) among international organizations. It is the only international trade association dedicated exclusively to the support and defence of the interests of the hotel and restaurant industry worldwide. It is a non-profit organization and officially recognized by the United Nations. The International Hotel & Restaurant Association monitors all international agencies and lobbies on their behalf in the field of hospitality and gastronomy (IH&RA 2023).

The Association of Hotels and Restaurants of the Slovak Republic (AHSR), which defines itself as a voluntary, non-political, interest-based and professional organization operating in the territory of the Slovak Republic with its seat in Banská Bystrica, is another organization supporting hotel and hospitality cooperation. Its creation in 1993 conditioned the support of its members in the business sector to improve professional prestige, defend the interests of participants, collect information about the hotel industry and gastronomy, both for the public and for its members. The main goal is to defend the mutual interests of participating members against state authorities and organizations, and to increase their professional prestige. At the same time, the mission is to increase the professionalism of business and provide quality services in the hotel industry and tourism. To ensure these qualities, it organizes professional lectures for workers in the hotel industry (AHSR 2023).

The above-mentioned professional associations and associations in cooperation with the public ensure promotion and action at international exhibitions of the hotel industry, gastronomy and tourism. They support involvement in international booking networks. They provide professional training to their employees. Last but not least, the support of tourism in Slovakia as well as the publication of professional literature and magazines must not be missing (Orieška 2011).

The Historic Hotels of Slovakia Association (HHS), which groups hotels in historic buildings, castles and manors in Slovakia, is also active at the national level. It depicts the history of architecture, traditions and culture of the Slovak nation. Their goal as hoteliers is to preserve these values, provide quality services and convey unforgettable moments spent in member hotels. The guarantee of the existence of this association is the membership in the pan-European

Association of the Historic Hotels of Europe, which gathers more than 600 extraordinary hotels in 20 European countries (HistorickéHotelySlovenska 2023).

The private sector consists of the organization Best Hotel Properties (BHP), which acts as a platform for luxury hotel assets. Their basis is building on their know-how from many years of working in the hotel industry as a hotel owner, and in addition to ownership, they also focus on managing hotel assets. Their vision is to become an important leader in the hotel industry in Central Europe, through a pro-client approach to hotel management (Best Hotel Properties 2023).

1 Methodology

The main goal of the presented article is to evaluate the cooperation of companies in the hotel industry and to identify the advantages/disadvantages and effects of synergy of companies in the context of the hotel industry. This goal will be achieved through several key elements of analysis and evaluation that will consider current trends, practices and opportunities within the field.

In direct link to the main goal set out above, the following key research questions have been formulated (RQ):

***RQ1:** Which factors influence the behaviour of businesses within a professional association or hotel chain?*

***RQ2:** How do businesses working in a professional association or hotel chain cooperate?*

The object of investigation will be member entities (hotels and other categories of accommodation facilities) of professional associations and associations that bring together companies operating in the hotel industry in Slovakia in an international context – HOTREC (Confederation of National Associations of Hotels, Restaurants, Cafés and Similar Establishments in the European Union and European Economic Area) and IH&RA (International Hotel & Restaurant Association); in the national context – AHSR (Association of Hotels and Restaurants of Slovak Republic) and HHS (Historic Hotels of Slovakia Association); and a hotel chain belonging to the private sector – BHP (Best Hotel Properties). We asked companies belonging to professional associations and hotel chains through a questionnaire, in which we analyzed the benefits of mutual cooperation between member companies, focusing on the positives as well as the negatives of collaboration and the ways in which companies in the hotel industry cooperate.

2 Results and Discussion

In the research part of the presented article, we will evaluate the cooperation of companies in the hotel industry and identify the advantages/disadvantages and effects of the synergy of companies in the context of the hotel industry through the results obtained by questioning the respondents who were approached on the basis of their membership in professional associations and associations and the hotel chain. In the period of June – September 2023, we approached 200 respondents (accommodation facilities), while 120 respondents actively participated in the survey, which represents a 60 % return from the entire sample. Table 1 presents the profile of the respondents who took part in the questionnaire research.

Table 1: Profile of respondents – selective identification questions

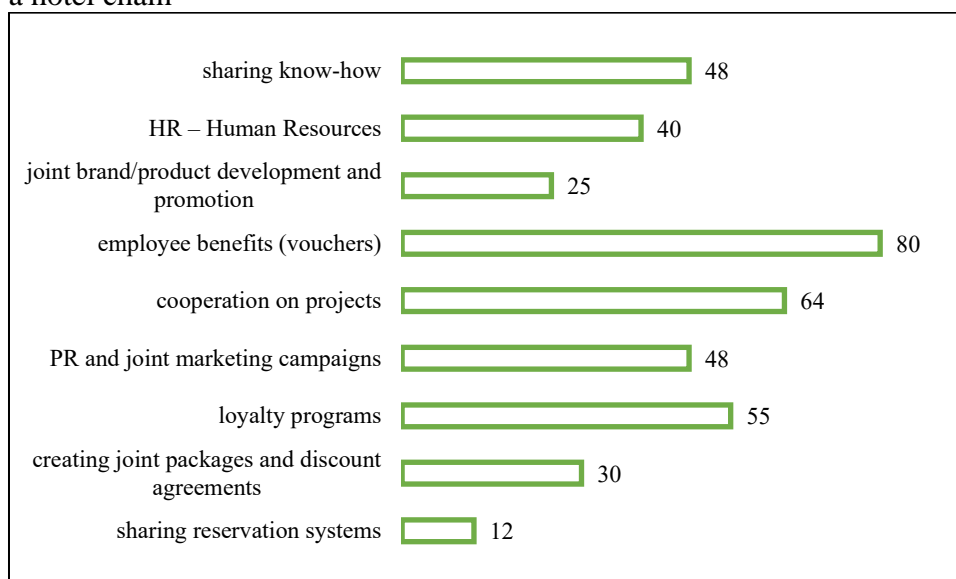
| | | Number (n = 120) | % of number |
|---|---|-----------------------------|------------------------|
| membership in professional associations/ a hotel chain | HOTREC | 8 | 6,7 % |
| | IH&RA | 8 | 6,7 % |
| | Association of Hotels and Restaurants of Slovak Republic | 64 | 53,3 % |
| | Historic Hotels of Slovakia Association | 7 | 5,8 % |
| | Best Hotel Properties | 33 | 27,5 % |
| category of accommodation facility | hotel | 120 | 100 % |
| awareness of members | yes | 80 | 66,7 % |
| | no | 40 | 33,3 % |

Source: Authors' research, 2023

The identification questions dealt with the selection of the requested companies for the professional association/hotel chain. From the results of the survey, we can see that the majority of respondents belong to the Association of Hotels and Restaurants of Slovak Republic (64; 53.3 %). The second largest part of respondents (33; 27.5 %) answered that they belonged to the hotel chain – Best Hotel Properties. The Confederation of National Associations of Hotels, Restaurants, Cafés and Similar Establishments in the European Union and European Economic Area and the International Hotel & Restaurant Association also had 8 respondents (6.7 %). The Historic Hotels of Slovakia Association had the smallest share of answers from respondents – 7, which represents 5.8 %. Based on the original Decree No. 277/2008 Coll. establishes the types of categories, as well as the classification features that must be met by accommodation facilities when classified into categories and classes. The categorization applies to accommodation facilities operated by entrepreneurs providing accommodation and related services on the basis of a business license. All respondents represented hotels, despite the fact that we also approached other types of accommodation facilities. The third identification question concerned the awareness of the members of the professional association/hotel chain about other members belonging to the same grouping – whether they contact each other and have an overview of their activities. The results show that most of the surveyed respondents have sufficient awareness of the members and the activities with which they cooperate.

Cooperation between accommodation establishments offers wide possibilities that can contribute to mutual advantage, improvement of services and competitiveness. Cooperation between accommodation establishments can be diversified and contribute to the creation of value for all participants – from guests to the accommodation establishments themselves. It is for this reason that we were interested in information on how the requested accommodation facilities cooperate with other member companies in the professional association/hotel chain. The answers to this question are illustrated in the following Figure 1.

Figure 1: Ways of cooperation of member companies in professional associations/ a hotel chain



Source: Authors' research, 2023

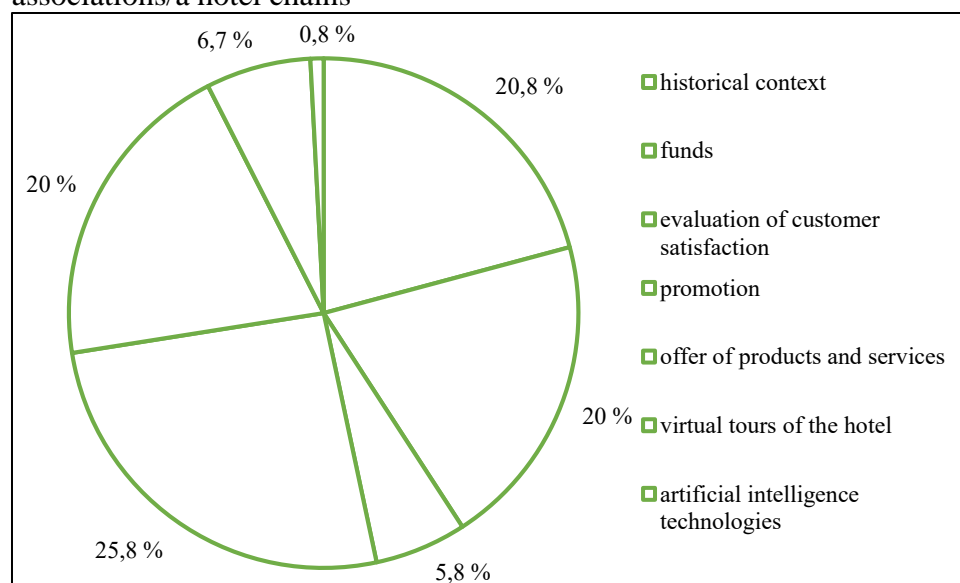
Based on the obtained data, we can see that the largest part of respondents in the survey includes benefits for employees in the form of gift vouchers as the best way to cooperate with other member companies within the professional association/hotel chain. Furthermore, the respondents indicated the possibility of joint cooperation on projects. Cooperation between hotels can include implementing sustainable practices, supporting local communities, organizing educational events, and promoting social responsibility. Joint projects may also include support for local suppliers and organizations. Such cooperation contributes to sustainability, increases brand awareness and strengthens the hotels' positive impact on the local environment and communities. Loyalty programs were identified by respondents as the third most common way of cooperation between members of a professional association/hotel chain. Inter-property loyalty programs allow guests to collect points or benefits at one property and then use them across the entire hotel network. This system encourages repeat visits of guests to different locations, motivates them to be loyal and strengthens the hotel brand. In addition, loyalty programs increase customer loyalty and create a strong loyalty bond between guests and the various hotels belonging to the professional association/hotel chain. The same result has been achieved by collaborating on joint marketing campaigns, increasing network-wide awareness and attracting new guests and sharing know-how through which facilities can educate each other on the latest trends and innovations in the industry. Surprisingly, the least appreciated method of collaboration was the ability to share reservation systems, which allows accommodations to redirect guests to partners with free capacity, which can be useful during periods of high demand or when there is overcrowding.

Innovative synergy and successful cooperation between companies in the hotel industry bring several benefits to the member companies of the professional association/hotel chain. For this reason, we gave the respondents the opportunity to comment on the benefits that result from their cooperation with other member companies. According to the respondents, effective cooperation represents joint marketing power, improved flexibility, as well as the development of technological innovations. The positive result of the collaboration is an improved guest experience that combines unique elements and services from different businesses, while this synergy allows for more efficient operations and operational optimization. The growth and implementation of innovations is another benefit of cooperation, where new ideas and concepts

can arise through the combination of the strengths of different enterprises. In this way, businesses become more agile and able to respond more quickly to changing trends. Other answers included joint marketing and uniform addressing of new potential customers. Although there are many advantages to innovative synergy and successful collaboration between businesses in the hotel industry, there are also several potential disadvantages. As part of the survey, we asked the respondents a question whose aim was to find out the biggest negatives of their mutual cooperation. One of the disadvantages is the complicated coordination between different companies with different organizational structures. Respondents cited shared clientele and the risk of losing customers as a disadvantage.

In the conducted survey, we were interested in the respondents' opinions on the difference between a professional association/hotel chain and competing professional associations/hotel chains in the hotel industry in the conditions of Slovakia.

Figure 2: Difference of the professional association/a hotel chain from competing professional associations/a hotel chains



Source: Authors' research, 2023

On Figure 2, we can see that 25.8 % of respondents (31) consider the better promotion of the professional association/hotel chain in which they are members to be different from other organizations on the market. Furthermore, the respondents marked the difference in the historical context (25), the financial aspect and a better offer of products and services were marked by 24 respondents. The aspects with the least number of percentage marks represented the innovations in today's market such as artificial intelligence technologies – chatbots and digital or electronic key cards of the mobile application.

Membership of accommodation establishments in professional associations/hotel chains brings a wide range of benefits that can significantly strengthen their position in the hotel industry. One of the main benefits is the opportunity to develop and build important business and professional relationships. This networking opportunity allows hotels to establish partnerships with other association/hotel chain members, suppliers and hospitality industry professionals. The following Figure 3 presents the respondents' answers to the question regarding the benefits of their work in a professional association/hotel chain.

Figure 3: Benefits of business membership in a professional association/a hotel chain



Source: Authors' research, 2023

Joint marketing initiatives are a benefit of professional association/hotel chain membership. They allow accommodation establishments to participate in joint advertising campaigns, trade fairs and promote their brand within the professional association/hotel chain. As part of membership, member businesses can also use professional resources and training provided by professional associations/hotel chains. These resources include executive development programs, customer service training, and other forms of professional education. An access to relevant statistics and data about the hotel industry is another beneficial element of membership. This information provides member businesses with a better understanding of the market, competition and trends, contributing to better strategic decision-making. Professional associations/hotel chains also provide a platform for sharing information and knowledge. This exchange of information can provide accommodation establishments with an access to new trends, case studies, research and expertise, which in turn helps in their continuous development and innovation. Certifications and quality standards, which are often proposed and monitored by professional associations/hotel chains, contribute to gaining the trust of guests and improving the quality of services provided in hotels. Problem solving support, legal advice and consultation are other services they provide to their members. In difficult situations, member businesses can benefit from professional help and cooperation with other members of the professional association/hotel chain. Last but not least, participation in industry events, conferences and meetings provides member businesses with the opportunity to acquire new information, ideas and business opportunities, thereby supporting their continued growth and development. In addition, associations have the ability to represent the interests of their members in policy and regulatory matters. This allows hotels to actively influence the creation of policies and laws that are crucial for the industry.

Promotion of a professional association/hotel chain is a key element in building awareness and attracting the attention of potential members, guests or business partners. Among the most used forms of promotion of a professional association/hotel chain are social media and internet advertising, which were indicated by 80 surveyed respondents. In today's modern times, Facebook, Tik-Tok, Instagram and many others are among the most usable platforms. Thanks to these leading applications, Influencer marketing is widespread as another method (56 respondents), which refers to the promotion of a brand/brand through an online communication strategy for more effective addressing of potential or existing customers. With the growing

number of followers on social networks, the possibility of publicity also appears, which was indicated by 48 respondents. Based on the answers of the respondents, television programs, leaflets and billboards are presented as the least used methods (8 respondents).

Conclusion

In the presented article, we focused on the evaluation of cooperation between member companies of professional associations/hotel chains. As part of the main objective, we set two research questions. The first research question was: *Which factors influence the behaviour of businesses within a professional association or hotel chain?* With the help of a questionnaire survey, we obtained the necessary information to answer this question. The most significant factor influencing the behaviour of companies within a professional association or hotel chain is perceived by member companies to be material procurement when necessary. Personnel support and legal support also play a key factor in better conditions among members. Another important aspect of the behaviour of member companies within the professional association/hotel chain was coordination and efficient activity.

The second research question was: *How do businesses working in a professional association or hotel chain cooperate?* The answers to the questionnaire survey show that the most used method of cooperation is employee benefits in the form of gift vouchers. Many respondents also identified joint projects as important within the framework of cooperation between professional associations/hotel chains. The necessity of cooperation is also the sharing of know-how and knowledge for the successful operation of member companies.

Based on the results of the questionnaire survey, we can claim that the vast majority of members in the professional associations/hotel chain have sufficient awareness of the activities of their members, which points to the development of the given activities within the given professional association/hotel chain. On the basis of the obtained data, we recommend focusing on strengthening cooperation in organizing events, as the feedback from the respondents pointed out that this was a beneficial activity. We evaluated the exchange of experience regarding clients, reaching out to new potential customers and joint marketing as the biggest benefit. The survey shows that the biggest negative in cooperation is the competitiveness between members. Despite cooperation within a professional association/hotel chain, it is common for other members to try to gain the best foothold in the hotel market as well as to increase profits, thus resisting competing hotels with better service offerings. As part of the cooperation, we also recommend focusing more on building a joint brand, as it was the lowest value for the given segment, as the questionnaire survey showed. By creating interesting content on social networks, the investigated professional associations/hotel chain could raise awareness and create a unique brand, not to mention the subsequent attraction of potential customers. Subsequently, they could consider expanding services, thanks to the high attendance of all categories of accommodation facilities.

Collaborative research efforts between professional association/hotel chain member businesses can have significant benefits for the hotel industry and academia, providing important insights and recommendations for further development and growth of the industry. The research carried out can contribute to the expansion of knowledge about strategy and management in the hotel industry, as well as about the impact of membership in professional associations/hotel chains on the performance and competitiveness of hotels. Managers of the subjects in question (hotels and other categories of accommodation facilities) can use the research results to optimize their membership in hotel chains and professional associations in order to achieve the maximum benefit for their hotel and increase its competitiveness. Research information can provide

managers with useful inputs for strategy and planning, which can lead to a better understanding of the market and better exploitation of opportunities.

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