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COVID-19 could damage diversity and inclusion efforts in travel

By Jill Menze (/Jill-Menze) | October 5, 2020

COVID-19 is likely to have a negative impact on **diversity and inclusion** (<https://www.phocuswire.com/Diversity-and-Inclusion>) across the hospitality, travel and leisure (HTL) sector, a new study finds.

According to **Women in Hospitality, Travel & Leisure** (<https://www.wih2020.com/>) (WiHTL), COVID-19 has exacerbated existing imbalances and discrepancies present in HTL businesses, particularly as they relate to the representation of women and ethnic minorities at all levels.

The **report (<https://www.wihtl.com/research>)**, titled “Guarding Against Unintended Consequences: The Impact of COVID-19 on Gender and Race & Ethnic Diversity in Hospitality, Travel & Leisure,” includes data from the MBS Group based on conversations with more than 60 of the sector’s leading businesses, as well as findings from a PwC survey of 1,500 HTL employees and real-life case studies and insights from within the WiHTL community.

The goal of report is to assess the unintended consequences of furloughing, restructuring, reorganizing and shifting to remote working from both a leadership and employee perspective.

Pandemic priorities

Because many HTL businesses have been focused on surviving the pandemic, diversity and inclusion has dropped down the priority list for boards and senior leaders over the past six months, the study finds.

Only 15% of companies say diversity and inclusion has been raised at board meetings regularly, while 42% say it has come up infrequently and 43% say it hasn’t come up at all. The topic is also not a top priority for shareholders.

Budgets and resources for diversity and inclusion have also been cut, and diversity and inclusion leaders have been furloughed, let go or diverted to other parts of the business as part of cost-cutting measures.

In fact, the report finds that a higher proportion - 65% - of women have been furloughed, put on reduced hours or made redundant, compared to 56% of men.

Sixty-seven percent of employees from ethnic minority backgrounds have been furloughed, put on reduced hours or made redundant compared to 62% of white employees.

Of HTL businesses interviewed, just 15% have measured the impact of temporary actions such as furloughs on women and employees from ethnic minority backgrounds.

Mass restructuring has also decreased the number of visible female and ethnic minority role models in the HTL sector – key to motivating diverse employees to advance within the industry and to encouraging diverse candidates to enter.

The report finds there is a gap that exists in businesses across the sector between understanding and action. A lack of data is the most glaring weakness - yet the biggest opportunity - for HTL businesses.

Future focus

Despite the negative impact of COVID-19 on diversity and inclusion efforts, there is hope for the future.

Half of survey respondents believe it's likely that changes brought on by the coronavirus could present an opportunity to improve diversity in the future.

Forty-four percent of businesses also report that diversity and inclusion has been a higher priority since the onset of the crisis, and 33% say it has remained as important as it was pre-COVID.

"This is not the time to slow down individual and collaborative efforts towards creating more inclusive environments. This crisis might be the catalyst for more positive gendered and ethnic change if we are able to harness the benefits and mitigate the risks," says Tea Colaianni, WiHTL founder and chair.

"This is the time to accelerate, propel and invest in diverse talent, creativity, innovation, create sustainable outputs and eliminate inequalities. It is not just a question of moral justice, it is a matter of competitive advantage in the face of huge adversity and uncertainty."

Adds Elliott Goldstein, managing partner at the MBS Group: "Put simply: businesses that fail to prioritize D&I - especially now - will suffer as they find themselves outrun by their more forward-thinking competitors, whose leadership is fully representative of their consumer base."

A **download of the full report is available here (<https://www.wihtl.com/research>)**.

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