

## Critical Success Factors in Hotel Companies: A Managerial Perspective

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### Abstract

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Literature shows several studies which identify CSFs in hotel companies, examining their role in developing competitive advantage or in supporting the development of the business. Based on prior literature, this study identifies Critical Success Factors (CSFs) which are the most suitable for supporting hotel managers in strategic, management and operational decisions. The managerial approach followed in this research allows to propose three sets of CSFs, each pertaining to one of the three hierarchical levels of the Anthony's pyramid, and opens the way to further research on the correlation between CSFs and performance management systems.

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### 1. Introduction

The present study examines the main issues related to the Critical Success Factors (CSFs) in the field of hotel companies, under a managerial perspective. The aim of this study is to find out which are the most important CSFs for a hotel company according to the literature and which are the CSFs more useful for strategic, managerial and operational aims.

The idea behind this research is that the knowledge of the CSFs considered as the most important by the literature may support managers to decide which activities are the most relevant to invest in. It is plausible that some CSFs are more suitable for supporting strategic decisions or business development, whereas other CSFs are more useful for supporting managerial or operational decisions.

The second section of this paper deals with the literature studies about the CSFs analysis and theory; the third section examines the most common CSFs identified in the literature and classifies them according to the three levels of the traditional Anthony's pyramid; the fourth section presents the conclusions and the limitations of this study, along with some future research avenues.

### 2. Critical Success Factors in the hotel management field

#### 2.1 A literature analysis on CSFs

Critical success factors are defined as those few aspects that must go well to guarantee success for a manager or an organization, and thus, they represent those managerial or enterprise areas that deserve special and continual attention for reaching high performance (Boynton and Zmud, 1984). CSFs are also considered as limited and particularly important events, circumstances, conditions, characteristics or variables that, if properly managed, can drive individuals, organizations or companies towards the success and can significantly influence the performance of a company (Bullen and Rockart, 1986; Leidecker and Bruno, 1987; Griffin, 1996; Dickinson et al., 1984).

Furthermore, literature shows that CSFs can be distinguished according to the following criteria:

- the person who observes the reality: CSFs vary from one observer to another, depending on personal perceptions (Jenster 1986; Lumpkin and Ireland 1988; Bergeron and Begin 1989);
- the object of the investigation, which makes CSFs to be general or specific (Geller, 1985);
- the dimension: CSFs can be external if related to market condition, competitors and environment (Brotherton & Shaw, 1996) and internal if they refer to the internal capabilities related to the human resources, organization structure, processes (Berry et al., 1997; Duchessi et al., 1989; Haktanir and Harris, 2005);
- controllability: as a consequence of the previous point, external CSFs are less manageable respect to internal ones (Brotherton & Shaw, 1996).

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## 2.2 A literature analysis on CSFs in hotel management

Many studies on hotel management support the relevance of CSFs in the hospitality industry, underlining the importance of CSFs for several aims: achieving competitive advantage (Geller 1984; Neal 1985; Brotherton and Shaw 1996; Hansen and Eringa 1998; Brotherton et al. 2003; Brotherton 2004; Elsharnouby and Elbanna, 2021), attract more customers (Benavides-Chico'n & Ortega, 2014; Camison, 1996; Coyle & Dale, 1993), improve business conditions (Nasution & Mayondo, 2008), recognize the most critical activities to be carried out for attaining the overall goals (Brotherton, 2004).

These studies can be distinguished on the basis of the research methodology adopted and the analysis perspective. With regard to the first one, most part of the studies identify lists of CSFs through surveys or interviews, sorting CSFs into classes arranged by importance (Brotherton and Shaw, 1996; Brotherton, 2004; Avcikurt et al., 2011) or by statistical significance (Yadegaridehkordi et al., 2018). Other research tries to identify CSFs through qualitative studies, such as content analyses conducted on online opinions of guests (Fuentes-Medina et al., 2018; Luo et al. 2021), or mixing qualitative with quantitative methodologies (Jusoh et al., 2018).

Regarding the analysis perspective, some studies focus the attention on specific dimensions or factors: for example, the research by Padilla-Meléndez and Garrido-Moreno (2014) is focused on the importance for hotel companies to implement a good Customer Relationship Management (CRM), considered a key factor for improving customer satisfaction and guest experience; Serra-Cantalops et al. (2020) emphasize the specific key role played by the electronic word of mouth (eWOM) on the hotel success; Wang et al. (2011) analyze the specific dimension of food and beverage amenities.

However, most part of the literature on CSFs in hotel management takes into account many hotel dimensions. Brotherton and Shaw (1996) carried out a survey in UK hotels finding several sets of CSFs in the following aspects: front office, food and beverage service, food and beverage production, conference and banqueting, leisure operations, back of house, sales and marketing, human resource management, accounting and control, guest accommodation. The study by Brotherton (2004), focusing on the budget hotel operations, identifies the following 11 "most critical" CSFs related to several dimensions: value for money accommodation, consistent accommodation standards, hygiene and cleanliness, convenient locations, quality standards, warmth of guest welcome, staff training, central sales/reservation system, consistent service standards, guest security and efficiency of guest service. Studies on small hotels consider as macro-CSFs the use of internet, the service quality, the financial performance and the marketing (Avcikurt et al., 2011). Other research identify CSFs observing the relation between CSFs and TQM; the study by Jusoh et al. (2018) reports a detailed list of soft and hard CSFs which should be considered for implementing TQM in hospitality industry: soft ones are leadership, process management, customer focus, continuous improvement, employee involvement, teamwork, organizational communication, education and training, organization culture, internal/external cooperation, employee fulfillment, learning, organizational trust. Hard CSFs are quality systems, quality improvement, quality assurance, ISO 9000 series, quality information, housekeeping, benchmarking, product/service design, planning for quality, design process management, Pareto analysis, quality control. With a similar aim, the study by Politis et al. (2009) starts from the most known international business excellence models (Deming Prize, MBNQA, EFQM, AQA, Canada Awards for Business Excellence) and recognize CSFs like enablers criteria (leadership, human resources management, strategic planning, resources, suppliers and partners, customer and market focus, processes) and results criteria (customer results, people results, society results, financial results, operating results, supplier/partner results) for defining a business excellence model applicable to the hotel sector.

Summarizing, prior CSFs studies mainly show the factors which are most frequently considered critical by the interviewees. However, a good part of the literature, taking into account the several internal and external dimensions that can influence the CSFs of a hotel company, focused the attention more on the *process* required for identifying CSFs, rather than on the *identification* of CSFs lists. Internal dimensions are mostly related to strategic aims, corporate organization and distinctive capabilities of the hotel company; external dimensions refer to political aspects, laws, society, territory. This point of view shifts the focus on the strategic planning phase, which seems the ideal time for CSFs to come into play. For example, Geller (1985) suggests to identify the CSFs after considering the specific strategic aims of the hotel company, starting from the most common CSFs of hotel industry. Similarly, other authors emphasize the importance of identifying CSFs during the development process of a hotel business, taking into account the feasibility of strategic goals (Venter and Cloete, 2007). Brotherton et al. (1996) argue about the importance of aligning CSFs to the critical performance indicators which allow an effective business management of CSFs. A deeper look at this aspect is provided by the literature on CSFs in strategic planning. Many studies highlight the strict relation between CSFs and strategic planning.

Jenster's study (1987), for example, observes that the identification of a selected number of CSFs is a step subsequent to the development of a strategic plan and other studies argue that long-term strategies require to identify CSFs for maintaining the competitive advantage along the time (Thompson and Strickland, 1998; Scholes et al., 2002). According to Leidecker and Bruno (1984), CSFs are an input for the environment analysis, resource analysis and strategy evaluation, therefore they are crucial for the strategic development process. Other studies emphasize the role of CSFs for an effective strategic planning (Gates, 2010), a successful strategic control (van Veen-Dirks and Wijn, 2002) and a valuable business planning process (Freund, 1988).

The strong relationship between strategic planning and CSFs involves a high importance of CSFs identification for supporting strategic aims; as a consequence, CSFs are equally crucial for defining the managerial objectives and the operational activities arising from the strategic plans.

### 3. Identification of CSFs in hotel companies: a managerial perspective

As explained above, despite a common basis of industry-related CSFs is recognizable (Geller, 1985), each hotel company should identify its own CSFs according to its strategic objectives, target customers, business model, resources available and environment. At this regard, SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats) and PESTEL (political, economic, social, technological, environmental, legal) analyses may help hotel companies in defining their strategies (Meilani and Anugrah, 2015; Taylor, 1994; Gregorić, 2014). After this strategic analysis, companies should define the managerial policies required for reaching the objectives and the related operative processes.

Therefore, it is possible to observe hotel management CSFs under the three traditional Anthony's pyramid dimensions (Anthony, 1965): strategic, managerial and operational. The strategic dimension of the company entails the identification of strategic CSFs inherent to the basic strategic orientation of the company; the managerial dimension requires to identify specific business area CSFs, taking into account the resources available (human, technical and financial); the operational dimension implies to identify even more specific CSFs related to the operational activities to be carried out for pursuing the managerial and the strategic objectives.

Strategic CSFs concern strategic choices which affect the whole hotel business system and business model, whereas managerial CSFs are related to key business areas for which managers are responsible. Operational CSFs regard the operative processes which allow to achieve the desired product/service quality level and consequently to reach the objectives. Some CSFs regard the whole company and thus have implications at the same time in strategic, managerial and operational levels. For example, customer satisfaction in hotels (Avcikurt et al., 2011; Fuentes-Medina et al., 2018; Geller, 1985) is clearly a strategic CSF, but strictly connected to the managerial and operational actions, becoming in fact a managerial and operational CSF.

On this basis, a pyramidal model of CSFs representation is proposed (Fig. 1), with the aim to help managers in: 1) identifying a wide set of the most critical CSFs emerging from the literature for each hierarchical level; 2) implementing the strategic planning and management control system; 3) defining the managerial responsibilities inside the company; 4) understanding which resources, people, controls, procedures, should be involved for pursuing their strategic objectives.

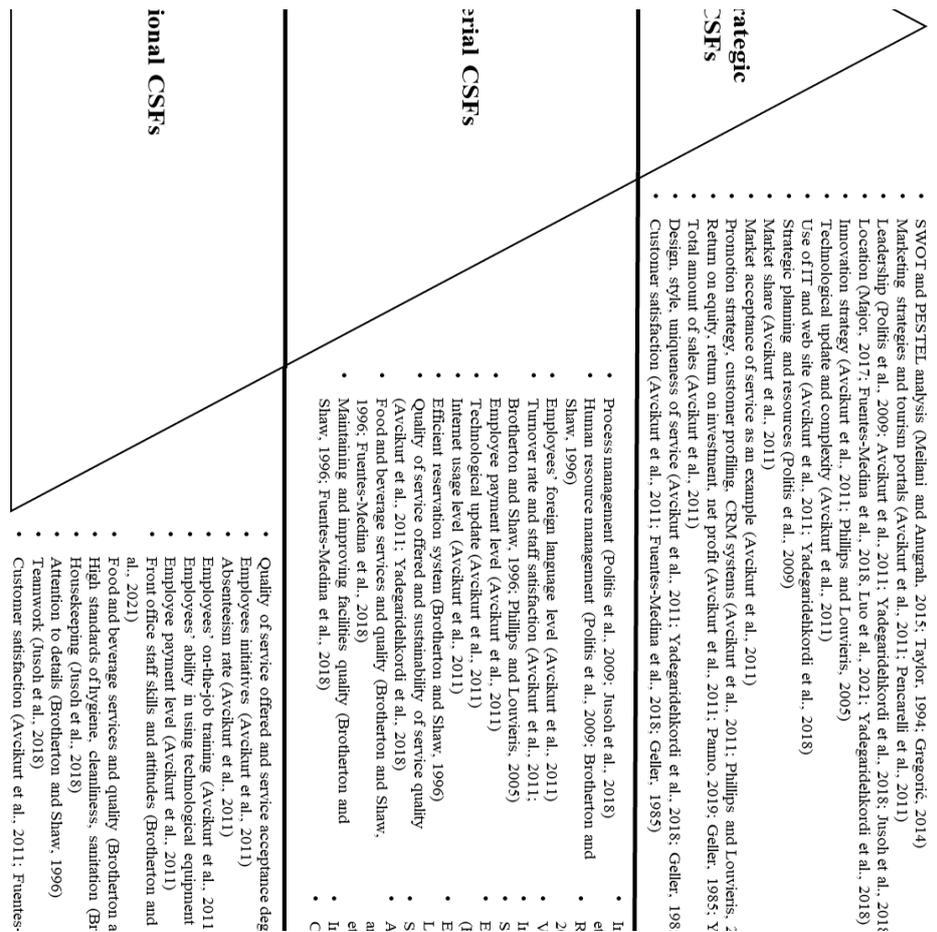
#### 3.1 Strategic CSFs

Strategic CSFs mainly concern aspects related to the SWOT and PESTEL analyses, the hotel location and the marketing strategy developed.

An effective analysis of external and internal environment is crucial for identifying the SWOT and PESTEL dimensions which may affect the future performance of the company. SWOT analysis allows to estimate the "weight" of each factor which may influence the strategic planning (Leigh, 2009). A successful SWOT analysis should be conducted with an iterative approach, rather than a linear one, and on the basis of the financial, technical and human resources available (Dyson, 2004; Valentin, 2001). Similar considerations can be made for PESTEL analysis, which allows a more specific external environment analysis. Also in this case, literature suggests an iterative and systematic analysis (Gregorić, 2014), as well as a holistic approach, considering that PESTEL dimensions are causally connected between each other (Ho, 2014).

In addition to SWOT and PESTEL analyses, positioning strategy is another important issue for hotel development. Hotel location is clearly considered as an opportunity and it is recognized as one of the most important features for a hotel, along with annex facilities and deployment system (Major, 2017; Kim and Okamoto, 2006). A hotel should be located close to the desired interests points and demand generators, which may be very different depending on the strategic aims (Major, 2017).

Fig. 1 – Critical Success Factors for hotel management at different hierarchical levels (own elaboration)



Thus, a hotel located in a dense central business district will have obviously different strategies respect to a hotel located in a rural or mountain site. Therefore, it is very relevant to analyze in advance the nearby touristic attractions, services and points of interest. It is also necessary that the strategic aims are in line with the business model: a franchising management, which promotes hotel chain expansion and standardization, is clearly different from a business model focused on the uniqueness of experience offered.

Strategic planning also involves a suitable marketing strategy. Literature suggests different marketing policies in the hotel management field: first one consists in the development and enhancement of the territory carried out by the public administration and publicized through the tourist portals (Pencarelli et al., 2011). Other policies refer to the web-based marketing and to the so called “experiential marketing”, increasingly considered as CSFs for hotels (Avcikurt et al., 2011; Yadegaridehkordi et al., 2018; Jusoh et al., 2018). Another form of marketing is the eWOM, as the positive opinions of prior customers seem to significantly influence the choices of future potential clients (Fuentes-Medina et al., 2018; Luo et al., 2021). Implementing a Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system is another marketing-related critical factor, as it provides great amount of information about clients, allows in-depth analysis of data adopting Big Data tools (González-Serrano et al. 2021) and, as a consequence, allows to fine-tune promotions to the customers’ needs.

**3.2 Managerial CSFs**

Managerial CSFs involve all the services managed by the hotel to reach the desired quality level. Literature shows that these services, and thus the related CSFs, are mostly based on the human involvement and include, among others: process management (Politis et al., 2009; Jusoh et al., 2018), accounting administration and cost control (Avcikurt et al., 2011; Brotherton and Shaw, 1996; Yadegaridehkordi et al., 2018), food and beverage management (Brotherton and Shaw, 1996; Fuentes-Medina et al., 2018), quality management (Avcikurt et al., 2011; Jusoh et al., 2018), facilities maintenance ((Brotherton and Shaw, 1996; Fuentes-Medina et al., 2018), security management (Brotherton and Shaw, 1996), human resource management (Politis et al., 2009). Another part of managerial CSFs, more based on technology, refers to the effectiveness of reservation systems (Brotherton and Shaw, 1996), to the internet usage level (Avcikurt et al., 2011; Yadegaridehkordi et al., 2018), to the technological update (Avcikurt et al., 2011), to the CRM systems adoption (Phillips and Louvieris, 2005).

### 3.3 Operational CSFs

Operational CSFs refer to all the operations carried out by the employees for reaching the hotel's objectives. They mainly regard front office (Brotherton and Shaw, 1996; Fuentes-Medina et al., 2018; Geller, 1985; Luo et al., 2021), housekeeping (Jusoh et al., 2018), teamwork (Jusoh et al., 2018), restaurant quality service (Brotherton and Shaw, 1996; Fuentes-Medina et al., 2018), high standards of hygiene, cleanliness, sanitation (Brotherton and Shaw, 1996; Luo et al., 2021). Literature on eWOM shows that operational factors are often considered the most critical by the customers: room, facilities, personnel and restaurant services are some of the factors most frequently evaluated in on-line reviews (Fuentes-Medina et al., 2018; Dong, 2014; Geetha et al., 2017). This is probably due to the very nature of the hospitality sector, in which the direct human relationship with the customers plays a very important role.

To this type of CSFs belong the warmth of guests welcome, the quality of the food, the cleanliness of the rooms and all the other "sensory" aspects that affect the personal customers perception (Luo et al., 2021; Jusoh et al., 2018).

### 4. Conclusions and future research

The proposed CSFs classification aims to support managers of hospitality sector to effectively developing, maintaining and improving hotel business and management, knowing the most important CSFs and the responsibility hierarchical level to which they belong. In this regard, the sets of CSFs provide the possibility to identify the causal links that may exist between the CSFs of each dimension, thus improving the alignment between strategic plans, managerial programs and operational processes. These alignment issues open the way to further research which may contribute to the extant limited literature regarding the correlation between CSFs, KPIs, Balanced Scorecard and other performance management systems in hotel management (Phillips and Louvieris, 2005).

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