

Building A Resilient Event Industry: Lessons Learned during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Introduction

The event industry is one of the most significant supporters of our national economy and key business sectors. According to the Events Industry Council (2018), the event industry generated 5.9 million jobs, created \$446 billion in GDP, and contributed \$104 billion of federal, state, and local taxes in 2016. Notably, the event industry, which revolves around face-to-face meetings and public gatherings, has been severely impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic (Madray, 2020). Recent industry reports indicate that event planners have expressed concern about their financial health and job security, given that the majority of events have been canceled (Meeting Professional International, 2020).

In the advent of the nationwide vaccination rollout, the event industry has now entered the recovery phase. In this climate of uncertainty, it is essential for the industry to be prepared for a new landscape and consider various scenarios that may occur and avail themselves of potential opportunities. Accordingly, guided by the theoretical framework of organizational resilience, this study interviewed twenty-six event planners regarding their risk and crisis management related practices. This study is longitudinal in nature, covering the stages before and during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. By examining and evaluating event planners' practices, the findings of this study not only provide insights into the lessons learned during the COVID-19 but also offer theoretical and practical implications that are related to crisis management and resilience in tourism and hospitality. More specifically, this study is guided by the following research questions:

- How is organizational resilience approached by event planners?
- What factors affect their approaches to organizational resilience?
- What lessons have they learned through their experiences with COVID-19?

Literature Review

Organizational resilience refers to an organization's ability to "anticipate, prepare for, respond, and adapt to incremental change and sudden disruptions in order to survive and prosper" (Denyer, 2017, p. 6). Resilience is multidimensional by nature. Addressing the resilience perspective of organizations can provide insights into how organizations and their units continue to achieve desirable outcomes amidst adversity, strain, and significant barriers to adaptation or development (Vogus & Sutcliffe, 2007). The concept of organizational resilience is closely related to crisis management because crises are often seen as adverse events that can disrupt a stable system. An organization's ability to bounce back is essential for its recovery during crises (Prayag, 2018). Increasingly, the scope of organizational resilience has moved from a reactive approach towards a proactive approach, which addresses the importance of improving organizations' preparedness towards a crisis (McManus, Seville, Vargo, & Brunsdon, 2008).

In the same vein, resilience has become an important research topic in tourism and hospitality. The primary application of resilience in tourism is manifested at three levels: individuals, organizations, and destinations (Hall, Prayag, & Amore, 2017). The majority of tourism resilience studies have focused on destinations, exploring the interactions between tourism development and the socio-ecological environment (Lew, 2014). Only a couple of studies (e.g., Dahles & Susilowati, 2015;

Orchiston, Prayag, & Brown, 2016) have assessed resilience from the perspective of tourism organizations.

Lee, Vargo, and Serville (2013) advanced two dimensions of organizational resilience – planned and adaptive. Planned resilience normally takes place in the pre-crisis stage, while adaptive resilience occurs after the crisis, requiring efforts such as leadership, external partnership, and internal collaboration (Pyarag, 2018). Lee et al. (2013) further outlined the key elements that determine an organization’s resilience, which include situation awareness, management of key vulnerabilities, and adaptive capacity. Studies (e.g., Prayag, Chowdhury, Spector, & Orchiston, 2018) built upon this organizational resilience framework have mainly focused on the context of destinations, while the event industry has not been investigated.

Methodology

This paper adopted a qualitative research design and conducted twenty-six semi-structured interviews. Such interviews allow the researcher (s) to obtain “direct quotations from people about their experiences, opinions, feelings, and knowledge (Patton, 2005, p.1)” and power the findings by featuring insiders’ perspectives (Phillimore & Goodson, 2004). For interviews conducted before March 2020, the interviewees were asked to (1) introduce how they developed the risk/crisis management plan for their events, (2) explain the main components in their risk/crisis plans, (3) express their opinions on resilience and organizational resilience, and (4) describe any challenges they may have encountered. For interviews conducted after March 2020, additional questions were added to ask interviewees to further explain how their organization has managed the COVID-19 situation, what measures have been taken to enhance organizational resilience, and how these experiences may affect their future crisis/risk planning.

The target population of this study was event planners, and participants were recruited through a purposive sampling method. A list of directories was obtained through a major professional non-profit organization. The research subjects were randomly selected and invited through emails.

All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim by a professional transcription company, and verified by the researchers. The average duration of interviews is 34.9 minutes, ranging from 18 minutes to 115 minutes. Following Hsieh and Shannon’s (2005) suggestion, the researchers employed a deductive coding process, consisting of three steps: (1) identify the major themes based on previous literature (e.g., Lee et al., 2013), (2) provide a definition of each theme, and (3) code the text and sort them into different themes. The themes were discussed, reviewed, and refined by the researchers.

Results and Discussion

A total of 26 event planners were interviewed in this study, whose profiles are presented in Table 1. The majority of the sample (n=18) are from the United States, six of them are from Canada, and one is from Denmark. The average industry experience of the sample is about ten years. Half of them (n=13) focus on corporate planning, designing, and planning all types of business events. Five of them work in third-party event planning/consulting companies. Three of them are associated with venues, and two of them are associated with destination management organizations (DMO). Four of them are specialized in festival and sporting events, and one of them is mainly responsible for designing and planning meeting conferences.

Table 1. Interviewee Profile

No.	Title	Organization Type	Industry Experience (yrs)	Location
1.	Event Designer	In-house: corporate planning	10	Denmark
2.	Events Manager	In-house: corporate planning	20	USA
3.	Event Manager	In-house: corporate planning	4	USA
4.	Event Manager	In-house: corporate planning	14	USA
5.	Event Manager	Venue	2	Canada
6	President &CEO	Third-party: corporate planning	18	USA
7	Owner & General Manager	Third-party: corporate planning	20	USA
8	Manager	Venue	3	Canada
9	Project Manager	In-house: corporate planning	8	Canada
10	Event Manager	Venue	5	USA
11	Program Manager	In-house: corporate planning	13	USA
12	General Manager	Venue	19	USA
13	President	Third-party: event risk management consulting	20	USA
14	Event Manager	In-house: corporate planning	12	USA
15	Community Coordinator	In-house: corporate planning	4	
16	Event Planner	In-house: corporate planning	3	USA
17	Event Coordinator	Third-party: corporate planning	6	USA
18	President	Third-party: corporate planning	12	Canada
19	Events & Committees Coordinator	Destination Management Company	4	Canada
20	Director, Congress & Meetings	In-house: Meeting Assemblies	15	Canada
21	Program and Events Director	Festival/sporting events	7	USA
22	Executive Director	Festival	5	USA
23	Festival Director of Operations	Festival	8	USA
24	Executive Director	Festival	15	USA
25	Director of convention services	DMO	10	USA
26	Senior Event Marketing Manager	DMO	12	USA

The major findings of this study are presented in Figure 1. First, following the organizational resilience framework developed by Lee et al. (2013), this study examined the concept of organizational resilience through two dimensions – planned and adaptive resilience. Planned resilience is tied back to the organizations’ crisis and risk planning process. Consistent with the findings of previous studies (e.g., Stacey & Sheryl, 2010), all event planners in the sample agreed on the necessity of crisis planning and are fully aware of the importance of a crisis management plan. The majority of them reported having a crisis plan in place, covering areas such as emergency response, customer relationship management, and insurance. Their development of the crisis

management plan is largely attributed to the event planner’s previous experiences with crisis, training, relevant knowledge and information, and situational awareness. Their crisis management plans are also influenced by the requirement of the venue and the policy of their organization. As one participant expressed, “we also followed the policy of the venue and worked closely with the risk management department of our own organization.”

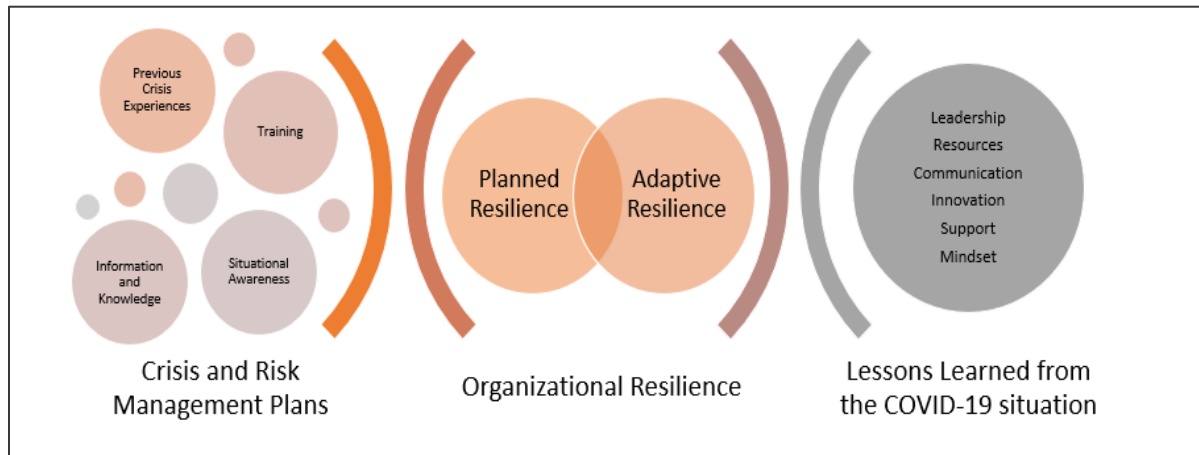
The second dimension examined in this study is adaptive resilience, which has been discussed in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Encouragingly, most event planners in this study determined their organizations to be resilient and anticipated that they would bounce back within a certain time period. Their confidence in the level of organizational resilience is primarily due to the support they received from their local communities and professional networks and the creative strategies they developed during such a difficult time.

Additionally, the leadership and responsive decision-making within their organization not only reassured them but also boosted their confidence. As one respondent explained, “we have a very, very good nucleus of individuals that make up our organization. We have some leadership that truly cares about us as employees.” Another interviewee also described their leadership being very “responsive” and all the major decisions are based on “teamwork and group decisions.”

Furthermore, the literature (Lee et al., 2013; Prayag, 2018) outlines several key elements that are critical to an organizations’ adaptive resilience, and the themes emerged in this study are highly consistent with them. These factors include mentality, communication and relationship, strategic vision, information and knowledge, leadership, innovation and creativity, and devolved and responsive decision-making.

Lastly, when it comes to the lessons learned from the COVID-19 situation, it seems that most resilient organizations have been excellent in communicating and managing customer relationships and creating innovative strategies to generate revenue. These organizations are also able to demonstrate strong leadership where responsive decision-making is embedded in the organization and support is provided to their staff. However, we observed that not all event planners and their organizations were sufficiently prepared for the pandemic. Although most of them indicated that they have been monitoring the situation closely and carefully, the majority of them did not have a robust plan in place prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. They tend to be reactive and come up with strategies as the situation worsened.

Figure 1. Major Findings



Conclusion and Discussion

The COVID-19 pandemic is probably one of the biggest challenges now faced by the event industry. The ability of event planners and organizations to continue to operate, produce quality events, and provide services and employment is critical to the local economy as well as the establishment of a resilient community. The event industry can be seen as a complex system involving event planners, attendees, clients, organizations, and all the businesses in the supply chain. Therefore, investing in resilience has become paramount. As shown in the findings, most contemporary event planners and organizations do realize the essence of risk and crisis management and the significance of resilience, and this understanding is becoming even more prominent with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, they are still facing multiple challenges, including the presence of a silo mentality as well as the inability to fully plan resilience and implement proactive measures. The findings of this study highlight the necessity of shifting from a reactive to a proactive approach in crisis management and resilience building in the event industry. The necessity of incorporating resilience in organizations' strategic planning is also noted.

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