

# Critical **competitiveness** factors for **hospitality**: a look into the future

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**Abstract** | Taking as starting point four possible scenarios for the Portuguese hospitality industry, we investigated which would be the critical factors of competitiveness for hotels in a 2020 time horizon. The results are innovative and challenging with practical implications for managers. The work is also valuable for the international foresight community by discussing the method and addressing some drawbacks of the scenario process.

**Keywords** | Hospitality, Scenarios, Competitiveness, Portugal, 2020.

**Resumo** | Tomando como ponto de partida quatro cenários possíveis para o setor hoteleiro Português, investigamos quais seriam os fatores críticos de competitividade para a indústria hoteleira considerando o horizonte temporal de 2020. Os resultados são inovadores e desafiadores, com implicações práticas para os gestores. O trabalho também é relevante para a comunidade internacional que trabalha em cenários discutindo o método e abordando algumas desvantagens dos métodos de cenários.

**Palavras-chave** | Indústria hoteleira, Cenários, Competitividade, Portugal, 2020.

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## 1. Introduction

One of the objectives of any firm is to achieve and maintain competitive advantage. For such it is essential to understand the crucial aspects of the competitiveness of the firms not only in the present, but also in the near future. In this paper our focus is on crucial aspects of competitive strategies for hotels, a significant segment of the tourism sector. The literature in this domain is very valuable seeking to identify a number of firm variables that impact on performance. Notwithstanding, a limitation from this literature is the retrospective approach. Hence, the results normally aid little to identifying competitiveness aspects of the future. Our paper adds value to the knowledge in this field, by presenting firm-level results on the crucial aspects of competitive strategies of hotels in the future (2020 horizon). The findings result from an exploratory scenario exercise applied to the hotel industry in Portugal. This innovative methodology seems to have a high potential for the identification of competitiveness factors in the future. The results are valuable for managers as well for policy makers and professionals in the field.

The paper is organised as follows. In section 2 we present the theoretical background and in section 3 the exercise is discussed and its results are presented. In section 4 the main conclusions are discussed.

## 2. Theoretical background

The rapid increase of globalization continues to increase global competition in all industries (Gursoy and Swanger, 2007). Today's business environment is complicated by the dynamics of change and competition (Phillips, 1999). In this context, one of the main objectives of every firm is to achieve and sustain a competitive advantage (Mathews, 2000). A significant amount of resources are spent trying to stay ahead in a dynamic economy, where new

players emerge and scenarios change constantly. There is an imperious need to search continuously for critical success factors. In the field of management the critical success factor (CSF) is a business concept required for ensuring the success of a business. The identification of the CSFs has a long history within management science (Brotherton and Shaw, 1996). Since the 1960s the concept has been used in many industries and in several fields of management, such as management of information systems, operational planning, definition of core competences, value chain and business process analysis (Brotherton and Shaw, 1996). Despite this considerable research in the CSFs in management there are few studies in the context of the hospitality industry (Botherton and Shaw, 1996).

According to Brotherton and Shaw (1996), by definition a CSF has great importance to a company, a very high priority and significant consequences (positives or negatives). According to these characteristics there are a limited number of factors that will be crucial to competitive success of a company. These important factors are means permitting companies to achieve desirable outcomes.

The literature review suggests that CSFs are derived from both within a company and its external operating environments (Brotherton and Shaw, 1996; Gursoy and Swanger, 2007, Harmsen *et al.*, 2000). According to Brotherton and Shaw (1996), the CSFs derived from the internal environment of the company may be associated with particular characteristics related with its products, processes, people and organizational structure, while the CSFs derived from the external operating environments of a company, are less controllable than internal ones, and could be derived from the industrial and market dynamics, broader conditions and trends. According to Gursoy and Swanger (2007) external factors include several macro-environments: demographic, economic, natural, technological, political/legal, social/cultural and competitive forces, while internal resources include know-how and various kinds of knowledge, staff, capital, production equipment,

buildings, operational, marketing capabilities and other company resources (Harmsen *et al.*, 2000).

The hospitality industry is currently immersed in a very uncertain and highly competitive environment. Additionally, hospitality services are different from physical goods by its intangible, heterogeneous, inseparable and perishable nature (Kandampully *et al.*, 2008). The customer's experiences and satisfaction with this service depend on mutual cooperation of various tourism sectors (e.g. travel agents, shopping centres, transportation and attractions). The demand fluctuates and is seasonal. The impact of digital media in this industry cannot be ignored because booking is increasingly made on-line. On the other hand reducing cost and offering of an environmentally friendly product are crucial factors for increasing competitiveness of these enterprises (Phillips, 1999; Molina-Azorín *et al.*, 2009). All factors mentioned justify our argument that the definition of hotel strategies based on the identification of the CSFs helps the hotels to develop long-term advantages and improve performance.

Most often companies have little or no control over the CSFs derived of external environment (Gursoy and Swanger, 2007). Consequently the majority of studies in hospitality industry analyse the internal strategic factors, mainly the factors that have significant effects on companies financial performance (Barros, 2005; Gursoy and Swanger, 2007; Montóro-Sánchez *et al.*, 2008). Additionally, several studies in the hospitality industry analyse specific critical success factors such as strategic alliances (Preble *et al.*, 2000), organisational learning (Bayraktarohlu and Kutanis, 2003) market orientation (Sin *et al.*, 2005), customer satisfaction (Chi and Gursoy, 2008), market diversification (Lee and Jang, 2007) employee satisfaction (Chi and Gursoy, 2008), human resource management (Alleyne *et al.*, 2006), leadership style (Patiar and Mia, 2008), and environmental practices (Phillips, 1999; Molina-Azorín *et al.*, 2009). The literature in this domain is very valuable seeking to identify a number of firm variables, internal critical factors of competitiveness, that impact on perform-

ance (e.g. Barros, 2005; Yeung and Lau, 2005; Sin *et al.*, 2005).

A lesson from this literature is that the factors affecting the competitiveness of hotels are of conflicting in nature and interact acutely, and that competitiveness cannot be defined by a single measure. Hence, the analysis of different aspects of the competitive strategies of the firms seems a viable alternative to studies that attempt to identify one or a reduced set of factors and how they impact on one measure of hotels' competitiveness. Notwithstanding, a limitation from this literature is the retrospective approach. Hence, the results normally aid little to identifying competitiveness aspects for the future.

Our paper adds value to the knowledge in this field, by presenting firm-level results on the crucial aspects of competitive strategies of hotels in the future (2020 horizon). The findings result from an exploratory scenario exercise applied to the hotel industry in Portugal. The world-wide accommodation industry has grown significantly in the last years, being, actually both large and varied. The Portuguese hotel industry too registered a significantly growth in the last decade. The number of hotels in Portugal since 1999 increased an average growth rate of 4.5% per year. The employment in this industry also increased, since 1999, an average growth rate of 3.1% per year. In 2007 the employment in this industry provides 28244 jobs, about 5% of total employment in Portugal (INE, 2008).

The exercise involved three workshops, with the participation of a group of experts, academics, industry, associative and local government representatives. Through a process inspired on the logic-intuitive method and adapted to the specific purposes of the research, four alternative scenarios of the evolution of the Portuguese hotel industry were developed (Sin Surprise; A Southern Experience; Global Emotions; Non-charming) and for each a number of critical firm-level competitiveness factors were identified. Accordingly to Wright (2005) scenarios are stories about plausible alternative futures that helping people to deal with complexity and uncertainty.

While traditional factors are still present in most scenarios, there are a few that will emerge in the future as more critical for success. This innovative methodology seems to have a high potential for the identification of competitiveness factors in the future. The results are valuable for managers as well for policy makers and professionals in the field.

### 3. Critical competitiveness factors in the future: an application to the Portuguese Hospitality industry

#### 3.1. Methodology

In this paper we report the final results from the Project Edf. The final aim of the project 'Enterprise of the Future' was to identify and discuss the future internal critical competitiveness factors for the hotels. The exercise extended for nearly 4 months and included three workshops. The exercise was developed by two researchers of the project team, added by two experts on conducting scenario exercises in Portugal. The participants were from academia, hotel managers, professionals from tourism associations and consultants of the tourism sector. We focused our exercise on a 13-year period, i.e. our time horizon is the year 2020, thus explicitly allowing for structural, and hence more profound, changes to occur (Börjesson *et al.*, 2006). Regarding method for data collection we followed a participatory approach (Van Notten *et al.*, 2003), using workshops with participants with a different interest on the matter (decision makers, experts), which facilitates the broadening of perspectives by including techniques to liberate the creativity of the participants (Van Notten *et al.*, 2003: 432, 731, 732).

In a first stage, using Börjesson *et al.*'s terminology, we explored scenarios that responded to the question 'What can happen' to the development of external factors. Varum *et al.* (2011) reported the results obtained during the first stage of the exercise. In a second stage we exposed participants

to the different scenarios and explored through a brainstorming exercise which would be critical competitiveness factors under each circumstance. This paper reports the results from the second stage of the exercise, that is, the identification of the future critical competitiveness factors. Accordingly to Börjesson *et al.* (2006) by exposing participants to these possible futures they have the opportunity to explore critical competitiveness aspects of the firm as well the consequences of their decisions under different possible situations.

#### 3.2. Four possible scenarios

As described in Varum *et al.* (2011), the four scenarios for Portugal focus very much around customer future trends identified by other studies. The studies by Yeoman and colleagues (Yeoman *et al.*, 2007; Yeoman and Lederer, 2005; Yeoman *et al.*, 2005; Yeoman and McMahon-Beattie, 2005), notable contributions regarding future trends in tourism, helped us to precise, explain and detail some of the critical factors identified in the Portuguese case, for example: between loyalty or global screening, focus on tradition or authenticity, and the desire for new experiences. Summarising from Varum *et al.* (2011), the participants on the exercise agreed that the two key uncertainties with the greatest impact on their business were: (1) client dynamics and loyalty: with the extremes being: (a) clients are loyal, competition is less intense and it is possible to retain clients in some segments; and (b) there is extreme competition between destinations and high segmentation, high turbulence and uncertainty, where clients are not loyal and search continuously for new destinies; and (2) the attractiveness of Portugal as a tourist destination, related to the way Portugal is recognized internationally, with the extremes being: (a) attractiveness based on traditional factors (weather, safety, sun and beach) combined with geographical or cultural proximity; and (b) global and strong attractiveness beyond traditional markets.



Figure 1 | Four possible scenarios.

By groping key forces and trends that may affect tourism in Portugal in 2020 the four scenarios were titled: (1) Portugal – Southern Experience (2) Portugal- Global Emotions, (3) Portugal – ‘Sin Surprise’, and (4) No-charming Portugal. The 4th scenario was considered to be very close to the present situation. Hence, we developed critical aspects only for scenarios 1 to 3.

Participants were invited to write the aspects considered critical in a very intuitive way. Then, each participant had to select and detail a maximum of five critical aspects. At the end we had a list of critical aspects by scenario. Participants were asked

to rank each aspect as follows: “2” if the aspect is indispensable for the competitiveness and survival of the organisation under the scenario; “1” if the aspect is important for the organisation under the scenario; and 0 if the aspect is irrelevant under the scenario. Here we report the top 2 factors, based on the average value obtained and also the standardized value using the total average and the overall standard deviation. The average values for these ranged from 1.7 to 2.

Under the first scenario, Portugal – A Southern Experience, both the global economy and the Portuguese economy are growing. There is a desire to obtain experiences and products that are original, and for safe destinies. At national level, in recent decades Portugal has significantly improved its global accessibility and services, as well as the organization of the territory and environmental protection. These developments have created good opportunities for Portugal, a safe region, offering real products/ services, natural landscapes, villages and peculiar environments. These attracted new clients in the senior and health segments, as well as created good conditions for the expansion of residential tourism. There are business opportunities all over the country, emerging from the development of offers at regional

Table 1 | Internal critical factors of competitiveness: scenario 1

| ICFC |   |
|------|---|
| 1    | Innovation                                      |
| 2    | Strong professional training                    |
| 2    | Certification                                   |
| 2    | Improve human resources                         |
| 2    | Internal communication                          |
| 2    | Capacity to conduct global communication        |
| 2    | Creativity and marketing                        |
| 2    | Training in new ICT technologies                |
| 2    | To have specialists on the hotel segment market |

Source: own elaboration.

level, drawing upon local partnerships, local skills and advantages. The offer, in particular in the interior and locations of natural beauty, is characterized by an environment of safety and fun.

Accordingly to the participants the top critical factors under such conditions are innovation and aspects related to human resources qualifications and competencies, in terms of technical skills, and communication. Innovation is critical for the company to be able to offer different products, to reinvent continuously new experiences, and for such there is a strong need to develop capacity to forecast and foreseen global tendencies.

Under the second scenario, Portugal – Global Emotions, disposable income has increased considerably and international travelling has expanded substantially, but competition between destinies and experiences is intense. In this scenario of 2020, customers are highly educated, sophisticated and travelled.

Consumer searches for ‘products and services which meet the individual’s specific needs’ and people are concerned with the environment and quality of life. There are many niche opportunities, and the tourist faces a complex choice. Fast and low cost accessibility combined with a more pleasant territory organization and environment together with diversified offers, have attracted new costumers from other traditional markets. These external developments were well explored, and Portugal became a

sustainable tourist destination offering authentic experiences. First, a few regions maintained their tranquillity and restricted access. Second, many leisure places have broadened their offers so that a wider range of activities is presented together. These options allow people to maximize the efficient use of their time. The critical factors for hotels under such circumstances are focused on human resources training and quality, ensuring certification as well as alliances to offer specialised services.

By last, the third scenario, ‘Sin Surprise’. In the last decade international travelling has not expanded much due to a worsening of security and environmental threats in many parts of the globe. However, Portugal has somehow benefited from this scenario and remained an attractive location by offering good weather conditions, a natural landscape and safety. Proximity (cultural, historical and geographical) is another variable explaining the flux of tourists in this scenario. Retaining the market was possible only because there were significant improvements regarding international communication: the rehabilitation of patrimony and exploitation of the cultural heritage of Portugal. Nevertheless, customer power and competition pressured margins down. With a constant and traditional demand, the players in the market did not make significant investment to overcome structural limitations: technological limitations, untrained personnel, territorial disorganization, and a deficient and disarticulated health system. As a consequence, it will be difficult in the future to attract high-income clients that look for high quality standards and comfort. Under such situation, price is a critical factor.

**Table 2** | Internal critical factors of competitiveness: scenario 2

| ICFs |   |
|------|---|
| 1    | Strong professional training                                |
| 1    | Security  |
| 1    | Certification   |
| 1    | Internal communication                                      |
| 2    | Cultural and linguistic training about the targeted segment |
| 2    | Social and ethical responsibility policies                  |
| 2    | To have internal health services for senior tourists        |
| 2    | Specialise on the health tourism sector                     |
| 2    | Agreements and alliances with private clinic                |

Source: own elaboration.

**Table 3** | Internal critical factors of competitiveness: scenario 3

| ICFs |   |
|------|---|
| 1    | Prices similar to the Spanish ones                          |
| 2    | Cultural and linguistic training about the targeted segment |

Source: own elaboration.

### 3.3. Overall critical aspects of hotels' competitive strategies

The aspects related to human resources training in various aspects (languages, culture, managerial, technology) seem to be strategic. Looking at the overall results, the capacity of the hotels to develop and strengthen a large pool of aspects is more decisive for scenarios 1 and 2 than for 3. Scenarios 1 and 2 are more demanding from the hotel management point of view. Aspects related to human resources training in various aspects are decisive under scenarios 1 and 2. Offer integrated products of high quality are important under scenario 1 and 2 but irrelevant under scenario 3. Security, social responsibility and ethics as well as certification, marketing/communication, appear determinant in all scenarios, but more under scenario 2 and less under the 3rd. Is to highlight the importance of the aspects related to creativity and /innovation under scenarios 1 and 2. There are various important aspects related to health/ nature and healthy life.

Under scenario 3 the price, the offer of standard products, and the focus on the Spanish culture/ language is however critical for the success of the organisation.

## 4. Conclusion

The Portuguese tourism – and consequently the hospitality industry – needs to look to the future and to set out sustainable strategies (Videira *et al.*, 2006). In this paper we use scenarios to derive internal critical competitiveness factors in the future for the Portuguese hotel industry with a 2020 horizon. The aim is to contribute to the knowledge of scenario methods in practice and to help policy planners and managers recognize, consider and reflect on the factors that are likely to be critical for hotels, under different future.

By using qualitative techniques we were able to explore the future 'informed by opinions and

judgments based on subjective and creative interpretations of the changes influencing the future' (Popper, 2008: 70). At the same time, because there are various limitations to the use of intuitive-logical methods, futures exercises of this type may complement the analysis with more quantitative data and use of quantitative models. Taking as example, Butler (2009) argues that a rather confused pattern of tourism development is developing and accordingly to him, these tensions make difficult to predict the future patterns of tourism. Also, from Postma and Liebl (2005) one may argue that because scenario planning deals mainly with predetermined uncertainties, the unknowable is not considered. Overall, and in spite of its limitations, the exercise offered the opportunity for hospitality managers and researchers to interact on a topic of theoretical and practical importance. It also made all participants more open to thinking about future challenges.

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