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**Excellence in hotel businesses: the case of a European quality award-winning hotel**

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## Excellence in hotel businesses: the case of a European quality award-winning hotel

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**Abstract:** The hotel industry is a useful domain to apply quality management systems given the structure of properties with numerous stakeholders and processes. The inclination of hotel businesses towards excellence models is low despite a high rate of usage of other quality management systems. This study therefore aims to showcase a European Quality Award-Winning hotel – AlpenResort Schwarz – and offer insights into the implementation of and results and benefits from the European Foundation for Quality Management Excellence Model (EFQM EM) to enable hotel businesses to become aware of the excellence concept and the model as a tool to improve their competitive advantage and sustainable performance. The major finding of the study is that the EFQM EM is effective for independent hotels, enabling small businesses to gain an international view when improving their managerial systems in accordance with sustainable development goals.

**Keywords:** EFQM Excellence Model; total quality management; TQM; business excellence; hotel industry; AlpenResort Schwarz; Austria.

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### 1 Introduction

Business excellence is a contemporary approach granted much attention from scholars and practitioners in the last two decades (Hussain et al., 2020; Unnikrishnan et al., 2019). Recent years in particular show an increasing trend towards examining business excellence from various perspectives (Ghafoor et al., 2020). However, tourism and hotel businesses appear to have less interest in this strategic thinking and the scarcity of implementations or research in these areas is evident (Metaxas and Koulouriotis, 2019; Şanlıöz-Özgen, 2016) despite the increasing number of hotels on the way to excellence with the EFQM EM (EFQM Recognition Database, 2020) and the general belief that excellence practices are limited to manufacturing (Dale et al., 2000). However, recent

research in the field of hospitality reveals the potential for excellence models to assess the performance of hotel businesses for a sustainable competitive advantage (Liu and Ko, 2018; Politis and Grigoroudis, 2020; Rahman et al., 2019).

As a method of excellence, the EFQM EM is among the most prestigious and reputable frameworks in the world (Politis and Grigoroudis, 2020; Rahman et al., 2019; Ubaid and Dweiri, 2020). This model is a globally recognised framework, which helps organisations to manage change and improve performance (EFQM, 2019). A few businesses in the hotel industry have received award achievements for best practice in excellence, which might inspire other hotels to improve their operations to sustain higher organisational performance in various aspects. In this respect, the goal of this study is to introduce a form of best practice with the intention to encourage hotel businesses to apply a holistic approach of continuous improvement for all relevant stakeholders in order to drive the industry forwards towards a more sustainable future.

The current research was formulated and conducted in a case study design to offer insightful findings about the implementation of the EFQM EM in hotel businesses in relation to results and benefits achieved and the link to an impactful return on operational performance. The major finding of the study is that EFQM EM is very effective, especially for independent hotels, in developing an international vision of quality management and excellence, leading to the improvement of managerial systems. The hotel, used as a case study for this research was successful in implementing the model, leading to it receiving the title of European Quality Award winner in 2013. The hotel management contributed to tourism development efforts in the destination, contributing their experience and tacit knowledge to the excellence of hotel operations for impactful returns and sustainable performance. Other findings offer insight into how the EFQM EM was implemented as a strategy, what actions and processes were formulated and initiated and what results were achieved at the end of a ten-year period of dedication to excellence.

## **2 Literature review**

Excellence from a management perspective is a wider description than quality management for businesses to gain competitive advantage based on sustainable performance by exceeding the expectations of all stakeholders. As a model in this respect, the EFQM EM offers a methodology to assess the excellence level of businesses so that a more comprehensive and inclusive development including all the relevant stakeholders (shareholders, management team, team members, suppliers, business environment, ecological and social environment) is achieved.

### *2.1 Business excellence*

Business excellence is the recent focus of quality management-related research after total quality management (TQM) and performance management, particularly in developing countries (Unnikrishnan et al., 2019). Business excellence is a perspective encompassing a continuous process of internal standards and processes involving the management of all stakeholders to fulfil their expectations in an engaging environment (Saleh and Watson, 2017). This approach has been the focus when coping with a competitive environment on a global scale since the 1980s, incorporating innovation, ability to change and leadership

(Metaxas and Koulouriotis, 2014; Unnikrishnan et al., 2019). Excellence helps organisations to create a corporate culture with strategies and values complemented by systems, structures, human resource practices and talent management under the inevitable leading role of top management, encouraging teamwork and empowerment (Horvitz and Neville, 1996). This orientation is inevitable, especially in a competitive environment with the collective challenges, uncertainty and risks posed by various external factors (Saleh and Watson, 2017).

Narrowly defined, excellence refers to problem- or needs-handling procedures in place (Johnston, 2004). More widely, the ultimate target for excellence lies in in-depth and continuous efforts to understand customers and align the systematic run of the organisation by analysing each point with the potential effect on customer experience (Ford et al., 2012). Customer expectations are therefore exceeded with the goal of surprising and delighting for a memorable experience, making customers return and recommend the business to others. Delight is a key term in excellence, especially for service or experience offerings, as intense feelings on the part of customers for organisations, team members or offerings generate loyalty (Johnston, 2004). Thus, excellence is highly dependent on insightful research into the customer profile, including experiences, wishes, preferences and critical attributes, leading to the most personalised experience possible (Ford et al., 2012). Moreover, strategic orientation, the commitment of top management, high standards, evaluation of service performance and prompt action on complaints are critical to delighting customers, leading to sustainable relationships and loyalty (Mandal, 2020).

Commitment to excellence enables organisations to delight customers through excited team members and simple and improved processes (Vora, 2002). The human resources process plays a critical role in alignment with the excellence strategy in terms of creating a common mindset, skills development through training, rewards, empowerment and organisational communication (Horvitz and Neville, 1996; Paraschi et al., 2019) given the critical role of team members in delivering customer experience, managing direct interactions and acting to resolve unexpected requirements or inevitable problems (Ford et al., 2012).

Based on a greater focus on processes, which can be changed through the active roles of team members (Zwetsloot and van Marrewijk, 2004), a systematic approach represents the essence of excellence in terms of administrative orientation, simple and flexible procedures, recognition of variable departmental tasks and measurement to obtain feedback on performance (Horvitz and Neville, 1996). Such systematic thinking is challenging because of the difficulty of aligning management's language, departmental goals, performance standards, physical settings and staff issues with the mission so that assessment produces a complete evaluation of performance (Crotts et al., 2005). Another challenge is the requirement for long-term dedication from the entire team through conducting serious self-assessments – this can be overcome by giving team members participatory roles (Metaxas and Koulouriotis, 2014) in terms of decision-making, planning, innovation, teamwork, rewards, interdepartmental cooperation and empowerment to achieve strategic goals (Dahlgaard et al., 2019).

Business excellence has been formulated in various quality models to introduce a framework for businesses to assess their business performance. These models show a high degree of similarities with TQM systems, particularly ISO certification (Dale et al., 2000; Gómez et al., 2017; Ubaid and Dweiri, 2020). Businesses using TQM practices might therefore easily implement such models to achieve excellence as the TQM

approach has played a leading role in the development of business excellence (Hussain et al., 2020). The majority of the models also offer the opportunity for best performers to win a quality award and gain recognition in the application of excellence, enabling them to showcase best practice for other businesses searching for excellence (Rahman et al., 2019). The models offer a generic framework with essential concepts and criteria, which are applicable for various sectors, including hotel businesses (Politis and Grigoroudis, 2020; Rahman et al., 2019).

## 2.2 European Foundation for Quality Management Excellence Model (EFQM EM)

The EFQM EM is among the most reputable business excellence models in the world to measure the performance of businesses for sustainable competitive advantage (Politis and Grigoroudis, 2020; Rahman et al., 2019; Ubaid and Dweiri, 2020). Excellence in the EFQM EM is attributed to organisations that “achieve and sustain outstanding results that meet or exceed the expectations of stakeholders” [EFQM, (2019), p.10]. The EFQM EM was first launched in 1991, using the awarding method, and has passed through five revisions, with the final version completed in 2019, to help organisations with their efforts in innovation and improvement (EFQM, 2019). With its focus on sustainable results, the EFQM EM is a dynamic model and revised regularly with consideration given to global trends and perspectives to drive businesses towards a more sustainable future. This dynamic nature is demonstrated in Table 1, which summarises the basic concepts of the latest versions of the EFQM EM.

As shown in the details of both models, set out in Table 1, the EFQM EM approach is grounded in input elements (enablers versus direction and execution) leading to expected and targeted outcome elements (results) in various dimensions. The 2012 model was an assessment tool to lead organisations towards innovation, learning and creativity. The final model, with its emphasis on sustainable development goals, offers a framework to adapt changes and transform (EFQM, 2019). The focus on customers and people in organisations, in relation to European values, always forms the principal part of the model.

When the current study was initiated, the 2012 model was prevalent, meaning that the hotel business used as a case study in this article adopted that version of the model and ultimately obtained the European Quality Award. That model essentially achieved sustainable results by adding value for customers, creating a sustainable future, developing organisational capability, harnessing creativity and innovation, leading with vision, inspiration and integrity, managing with agility and succeeding through the talent of people (EFQM, 2012). The core elements of the EFQM EM appear as people and processes in terms of agents for excellence, leading to targeted results and social impact (Camisón, 1996). One critical feature is the scope to integrate external stakeholders such as suppliers and society within partnerships or dialogues (Zwetsloot and van Marrewijk, 2004). Consequently, as a method for achieving excellence, the EFQM EM is regarded as a good way to initiate organisational improvement (Gómez et al., 2017). Moreover, the frame of the model is comprehensive, creating a culture where organisational components are integrated with vision, ethical leadership, dynamic planning and knowledge management to cope with uncertainties and risks (Saleh and Watson, 2017).

**Table 1** Evolution of the EFQM EM

		<i>2012 version</i>
Enablers		Leadership People Strategy Partnerships and resources
Results		People Customers Society Business
		<i>2019 version</i>
Direction		Purpose Vision Strategy Organisational culture Leadership
Execution		Engaging stakeholders Creating sustainable value Driving performance and transformation
Results		Stakeholder perceptions Strategic and operational performance

*Source:* Author's production based on the insights reported in EFQM (2012, 2019)

There are several similarities between the EFQM EM and ISO certification, which is a preferable and frequent quality management system for businesses as a TQM model (Dale et al., 2000; Gómez et al., 2017). TQM practices, with or without an award, increase the possibility of business excellence through higher customer and employee satisfaction and operational performance, leading to positive impact on corporate performance (Gómez et al., 2017; Vora, 2002). The core principles of TQM focus on customers, team members and data-driven management working with scientific decisions and systematic procedures (Saunders and Graham, 1992), leading to creation of a new organisational culture of business excellence by means of novel techniques, methods and tools (Dahlgaard et al., 2019). Notwithstanding, excellence models play a guiding role for organisations in their attempts at managerial improvement using the TQM philosophy (Gómez et al., 2017). The EFQM EM therefore appears to be a structured approach, embedding excellence in organisations (Asif and Gouthier, 2014), and is regarded as a response to the ineffectiveness of TQM in order to put quality management in effect to drive competitive advantage as a holistic model through self-assessment in a flexible setting with easy measurement and continuous improvement (Dale et al., 2000). In this respect, the EFQM EM offers a framework to help organisations with strategy formulations including integration and involvement of all stakeholders, assessment using internal and external dimensions and refinement of strategies to develop strategic capability and competitive advantage (Balbastre-Benavent and Canet-Giner, 2011).

One issue with the EFQM EM is that management focus is limited to a standard method of quality management to increase annual scores without much consideration of the middle management team as the real executors of excellence (Dale et al., 2000). However, the EFQM EM is a dynamic approach involving all relevant stakeholders with a remarkable emphasis on sustainability and innovation (EFQM, 2019), offering a generic model applicable to various businesses of different scales, including tourism businesses, wishing to see notable improvement in corporate performance (Gómez et al., 2017; Paraschi et al., 2019; Politis and Grigoroudis, 2020).

In summary, business excellence puts more emphasis on system thinking by taking customers, team members, processes, tasks and feedback into consideration within the continuous improvement framework and strategic perspective, harmonising all processes around a mission, vision and values. The EFQM EM, on the other hand, extends this understanding to other external stakeholders, recalling the continuum of offerings (suppliers) and societal effects of organisations and leading to a global approach with a significant focus on sustainability.

### *2.3 The EFQM EM in hotel businesses*

Hotel businesses tend to apply quality management primarily for internal reasons such as improvement in operations, processes and employee satisfaction, leading to favourable effects on financial performance, in addition to external reasons such as customer recognition and supplier management (Alonso-Almeida et al., 2012). Moreover, the mutual relationship between quality management practices and operational performance is evident as high performance facilitates implementation of quality actions in hotels (Tarí et al., 2017).

As for excellence in hotel businesses, research is more limited than in other sectors and focuses on people (leadership, customers, team members, training, communication, stakeholders) and process-related issues (Metaxas and Koulouriotis, 2019). A greater number of discrete and quantitative criteria are required for self-assessment (Politis et al., 2009), potentially creating complications for performance evaluations (Litos et al., 2011) because of the complicated structure of processes. Identification of points to collect relevant data is therefore a challenge in defining appropriate measures of performance evaluation in hotels (Saunders and Graham, 1992).

While TQM identifies the framework of experience delivery in a hotel setting, excellence paves the way to planning and executing how each experience element in this framework is applicable in a sustainable manner, leading to continuous improvement (Dale et al., 2000). Moreover, given highly experiential structures in the hotel industry with the intensive presence of the physical setting and human interactions, including in the form of emotional labour from team members, excellence efforts require more focus on human resource strategies in terms of recruitment and selection, training, employee support and empowerment (Johanson and Woods, 2008). Thus, human resource management is critical to creating excellence in hotels (Litos et al., 2011) and facilitating the participation of team members in strategic decisions and their implementation (Politis et al., 2009).

Few examples of excellence award winners in the hotel industry showcase this emphasis on human resource issues. The Ritz-Carlton Hotel Company was the first hotel organisation to win an excellence award (Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award) in

1992 as a result of the management's commitment to quality and empowerment of team members (Camisón, 1996; Sucher and McManus, 2001). Moreover, despite the existence of an outstanding quality program with the ultimate aim of exceeding customer expectations using a customer recognition program, the company opted to implement an excellence model in order to disseminate high standards to all other processes, developing a variety of new activities and performance measures, as well as continuous improvement, quality planning and supplier management. Their dedication to operational excellence continued even after receipt of the award, leading to their second excellence award in 1999, when they became the first service company to win the award for the second time (Sucher and McManus, 2001).

As for the European region, Schindlerhof was the first hotel to win the European and German Quality Awards in 1998, following ISO 9001 certification in 1995 (EFQM, 2003) as a result of corporate orientation to soft service factors such as warmth, friendliness, politeness and reliability. Their efforts in excellence continued in the following years with ISO 14001 certification in 2002, a second German Quality Award in 2003 and two European quality prizes – the first time for customer focus in 2003 and the second time for people development in 2004 (EFQM, 2004). Schindlerhof is a significant example showcasing the co-presence of TQM and EFQM EM approaches to drive organisational performance. AlpenResort Schwarz, the case study used here, was the second hotel business to win the European Quality Award.

An example from the Far East is Conrad Centennial Singapore, which won the Singapore Quality Award in 2007 in a similar framework to the EFQM EM, with several internal and external performance measures. That property also applied a comprehensive assessment of processes to improve leadership, people and process management issues, leading to favourable effects on organisational performance (Singapore Quality Award: Conrad Centennial Singapore Summary Report, 2020).

As seen in the studies above and observed in the EFQM database, the tendency of hotel businesses to implement the EFQM EM, especially in Greece, Ireland, Spain and Switzerland, is evident. The number of hotels working towards excellence has doubled in recent years (Şanlıöz-Özgen, 2016) but the pace is still low in the context of the volume and variance of the hotel industry in the European region. However, the EFQM EM has the potential to put TQM systems into effect as part of strategic change for hotel businesses by introducing self-assessment tools as a means of critical self-evaluation and resource management. This is a particular problem for resort hotels (Camisón, 1996). Such models also enable hotels to consider their suppliers and partners as part of their excellence process (Politis et al., 2009). As the award winners showcase, luxury hotels with outstanding service prefer implementing the EFQM EM in order to base their experiences on excellence, reinventing their potential for higher customer satisfaction by exceeding their expectations. Furthermore, city hotels with relatively high excellence standards and hotels with higher stars of official categorisation tend to have better excellence practices in place based on better resource management, higher managerial commitment to quality and social impact (Camisón, 1996; Rahman et al., 2019).

### 3 Methodology

Despite the increasing amount of business excellence research into implementation of the EFQM EM in other sectors and the tendency of hotel businesses to apply quality management systems for competitive reasons, a few hotels have initiated this model to benefit from its advantages for sustainable performance. In this respect, the aim of this study is to showcase a European Quality Award-Winning hotel – AlpenResort Schwarz – and offer insight into the implementation and benefits of the EFQM EM, enabling hotel businesses to become aware of the concept of excellence and the model as a tool to improve competitive advantage and sustainable performance. The study's main motivation is to present a case study and reveal the results, benefits and impact of EFQM EM implementation in a hotel business as more research is needed in this area (Ghafoor et al., 2020).

In order to offer insight into an example of best practice approved by a quality award, the research is designed as a holistic single case study (Yin, 1994), with a hotel business – AlpenResort Schwarz – the most recent industry recipient of a quality award, as a unit of analysis. In line with the study aim, the following research questions were set to analyse the implementation and benefits of such an achievement in a hotel business:

- Situational analysis.
- EFQM EM journey with milestones.
- Results and benefits of the EFQM EM:
  - a managerial improvements
  - b EFQM award criterion: adding value for customers
  - c EFQM award criterion: succeeding through the talent of people.

Yin (1994) recommends several data collection techniques including interviews and documentary analysis in order to collect the most plentiful and insightful data and present the case study from several perspectives. The current study also employs these techniques so that data can be collected from various sources in order to reveal a wide range of findings relating to how the EFQM EM is implemented in hotel businesses and the results and benefits obtained during and as a result of this process. The primary data collection technique involved face-to-face interviews with the hotel manager and the quality management executive. The interviews took place in the hotel property in February 2015 and lasted approximately three hours, including a hotel site visit. The research questions were addressed to the participants during the interview and some other additional information was also included. The interview was digitally recorded and transcribed.

The secondary data collection technique involved documentary analysis and including consideration of various printed materials and online sources related to the case:

- EFQM EM strategy documents and evaluation tools including sample balance scorecard presented by the hotel
- staff information documents
- notes of the site visit including observations and answers to several spontaneous questions during the visit

- hotel website and reviews on TripAdvisor
- EFQM EM official website and recognition books.

Yin (1994) also suggests following a sequence in line with the research questions for the study to set out a chain of evidence, enhancing the reliability of the case design while reporting the findings. In this respect, as part of the first stage data collected from the interviews was analysed by categorising answers according to the research questions. In the second stage, data from secondary sources was analysed and added to the categorised content to support or complement the findings from the interviews.

## 4 Results

AlpenResort Schwarz is located in the Mieming village of Tyrol, 30 km from Innsbruck in Austria, and features 121 rooms and six luxury suites on an area of 32,000 m<sup>2</sup> with numerous facilities such as a spa, golf course and pools, in addition to nearby outdoors activities to welcome a wide range of customers including couples and families with young children (AlpenResort Schwarz The Resort, 2020). The hotel is a private family business dating back to 1910, with an intimate family feel, including family members at managerial level (EFQM, 2010). As a consequence of an approximately ten-year effort to achieve excellence, AlpenResort Schwarz became the European Quality Award winner in 2013 for adding value for customers and succeeding through the talent of people. Such a journey to excellence is a significant experience for hotel properties, particularly small family businesses, in order to improve their managerial processes for more profitable and impactful operational results for all stakeholders.

### 4.1 *Situational analysis of the hotel*

AlpenResort Schwarz is distinct in several ways given the nature of the destination, where the tourism season extends all year round despite its location in the Alps region, a centre of winter tourism activities. Thus, the property is in operation throughout the year with an average of 60% to 70% annual occupancy, whereas the high season occupancy exceeds 90%. The lowest occupancy is in the period between January and March, except for the school holiday period in February. At the time of the interview, the annual target market was dominated by German-speaking countries, including Switzerland (50–60%), Germany (30%), Austria (7%) and others (6–7%).

There were several reasons for this high occupancy. Running on a full-year operation since the early 2000s, AlpenResort Schwarz “is an atypical property in the region with challenges which are turned into advantages” as per the diversity of facilities for customers, according to the hotel manager. First, unlike many other properties in the region, the hotel management diversified the target market to include couples and families with small children throughout the year and families with older children in the high season. The property occupies a large area in a natural environment with plenty space for various facilities. The main attractions of the hotel include the spa, offering a variety of treatments, golf course, pools and children’s areas, including a farm. The spa and golf course are critical sources of additional revenue. Even in the restaurant, silent corners are available for customers preferring a calmer environment. Moreover, outdoor

activities such as hiking, tracking and skiing were also available. Business customers, on the other hand, were not a main target group of the hotel.

Furthermore, the hotel is one of two five-star properties in the Tyrol region (the other is a city hotel in central Innsbruck). The tourism office for the region organised many famtrips and journalist visits to promote the destination with a stop-over in the property. Another critical strength of the hotel is the share of direct booking channels for room sales (96% of all room sales). Positive word-of-mouth was very effective in attracting potential customers to book directly. This was the case before and after the development of internet technologies, leading to very profitable financial performance with nearly no commissions paid to third parties.

In addition to those strengths, there is much room for improvement in the AlpenResort Schwarz. The dominance of the German-speaking market limited the hotel's target group into a local customer structure despite a wide variety of offerings able to attract international tourists. The limited use of online travel agencies also constrained the worldwide online accessibility of the hotel. Their localised management and operations also limited the hotel's potential to discover market-specific online channels and reach some potential customer segments. For example, a short experience with booking.com, an online channel mainly dedicated to the European market, was initiated in order to attract Russian customers who mainly booked on Russian specialist channels. When the current situation is checked on the internet, the hotel is still inaccessible on the main online channels such as TripAdvisor and other meta search sites. One reason for this inaccessibility is the low demand for the destination amongst more diversified customer segments, as indicated by the hotel manager.

#### *4.2 EFQM EM journey with milestones*

AlpenResort Schwarz's journey to excellence dated back to the early 2000s and the hotel succeeded in winning its award at the end of a ten-year progression following consistent efforts on the part of executive managers (EFQM, 2013) with no prior quality management experience. The main aim of the management was to transform the managerial system and administer the development stage of the property. At that time, hotel capacity increased by 30%, resulting in more complications for business processes and leading to the need for a new management and organisation system to overcome the challenges presented. The management decided to apply the EFQM EM system upon the recommendation of a regular customer, who was an EFQM assessor. This was the starting point for the Schwarz family despite their lack of professional experience in this domain. The hotel manager expressed his initial thoughts as follows:

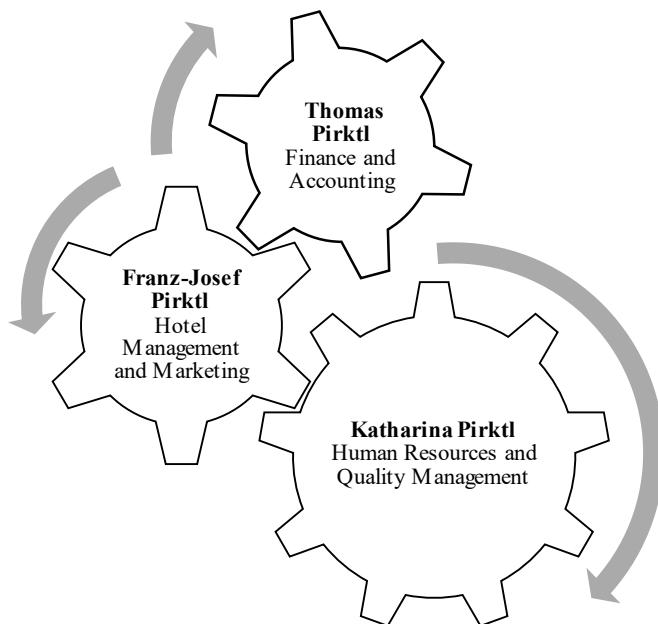
“We could not understand what it was but we said we would do. We thought it would be something good for us. We did not have any problems with turnover and financial performance. We were always successful in our relations with our guests and in financial performance.”

In 2003, the hotel management, then, decided to transform their operational processes using the EFQM EM at the strategic convention (EFQM, 2013), to be organised annually to pursue progression and evaluate the performance of the hotel. This event was a two-day internal assessment led by the family member in charge of human resources and quality management. This first internal assessment was only for the sake of understanding the hotel situation. No targets or evaluations were therefore performed but

a snapshot was created of the property in terms of quality management. This first attempt was challenging because of the busy schedule of the management team, meaning that the main outcome of this first assessment was to define overall priorities by department in order to improve the managerial system.

The EFQM EM application process started in 2005, with the first external assessment taking place after two internal assessments in the preceding years. Despite low scores, the result of this first external audit was encouraging as a first piece of feedback to enable planning of the principal actions and begin the move towards excellence. In this regard, the first action was to establish clearly the areas of responsibility for top management according to the education and specialisation of relevant family members (Figure 1).

**Figure 1** Job division among leading managers



This organisational action was critical for the hotel as the presence of various family members as department heads posed problems resulting from varied managerial skills and styles in expanding departments. Job division at top management and the leading role of the relevant family member in charge of excellence was defined clearly to overcome organisational problems and develop an improved structure. The next step was to lead the whole team in order to conduct the strategy formulation (Figure 2) based on vision, mission, values and strategic goals affecting all operative processes (EFQM, 2013). Strategy formulation became the reference point for all departments and team members, with these principles reflected in every action and operation in the hotel. Strategic goals were reflected in both departmental (balance scorecard) and personal (improvement interview) evaluations to maintain engagement and continuously improve. The aggregate scores of the personal evaluations also affected departmental performance at the end of the year.

The second EFQM assessment took place in 2008, and this was followed by the first organisational success in the form of a finalist position in 2010, recognising their

commitment to sustainable excellence. Their main strategy was defined as “to establish the hotel as the first choice of premium customers based on its vision to be a pioneer in facilities and by combining perfect setting with perfect service and warm hospitality” [EFQM, (2010), p.36]. The management’s main goal was to create a physical setting with plenty of facilities, integrated with the natural surroundings and offering a holistic experience based on excellence and a warm welcome.

**Figure 2** Strategy formulation



The beginning of the journey to excellence was challenging because of the reluctance of some department heads. However, top management decided to start at the same time to encourage the entire team to increase their awareness of the various requirements in different departments, as stated by the hotel manager:

“Everything we did, we did it together. We decided to have a new system so all managers started to use it at the same time. So they had the possibility to help each other. This was more effective so that everyone in the hotel got committed. We led them and trained them on how they should do it. Leading was critical. We needed to plan and make it suitable for all departments’ operations.”

Moreover, the hotel management did not apply the model for the sake of the model but to put excellence in action. For this reason, top management did not dictate EFQM terms, documents or other tools but motivated team members to understand, accept and apply actions in a mindset of excellence by taking part in actions with an awareness of targets and results. This was the main goal of the management, although the team members did not know exactly what the EFQM EM meant.

These efforts were followed by other achievements, including an Austrian Quality Award in 2012 and a European Quality Award in 2013. The national award process acted as a trial assessment for the European Award. In summary, AlpenResort Schwarz moved towards excellence following the below sequence:

- 2003 – first internal assessment for situational analysis, establishment of strategic convention to be organised as a two-day event every year
- 2004 – second internal assessment
- 2005 – first external assessment by EFQM with a low performance and first critical feedback on excellence, quality management, operations and processes
- 2008 – second external assessment by EFQM
- 2010 – finalist for European Quality Award
- 2012 – National Quality Award winner (Austria)
- 2013 – European Quality Award for creating value for customers and succeeding using the talent of people.

The journey to excellence required dedication over a period of ten years, from the very first step to winning awards. According to the management, financial costs to acquire the consultancy, assessment and certification processes were affordable for the property and worth spending in return for what was gained at the end. The EFQM EM approach enabled the hotel management to operate in an efficient way by managing resources and controlling their costs using dynamic monitoring and wise decisions. As a result, the management was satisfied with the outcome of their efforts, as the hotel manager asserted:

“Management system, resources, partnership, new ideas. We always concentrated on what was interesting to us. We did not do anything useless or senseless not only to save costs. More success, more money and more satisfaction for everybody. We were motivated to do what we did.”

### *4.3 Results and benefits of the EFQM EM*

AlpenResort Schwarz gained significant benefits on their journey to the excellence. Their major acquisition involved the transformation of the management system from a traditional family business to a modern management and organisational structure at international level. This represented an umbrella of many other achievements, with impactful results for all stakeholders.

#### *4.3.1 Managerial improvements*

The main aim of the management was to improve the managerial system and their feelings were that the EFQM EM was a ‘chance’ to achieve this aim by differentiating themselves from other family businesses in the region, as indicated by the manager:

“It was a great chance. We said let’s start! We started because we were willing to change and improve the management system of the hotel. Family businesses are quite nice for guests but not perfect for management.”

The aim was achieved by means of annual improvements with internal assessments led by the quality management team in accordance with EFQM EM guidelines. As a result, the organisation was restructured by adding flexible project groups in actions addressing strategic goals. Department heads, in addition to other interested and

relevant team members, participated in these groups with the following objectives (AlpenResort Schwarz, 2015):

- *processes*: systematic pursuit of procedures paving the way to obtain ISO 9001 certification
- *customer enthusiasm*: developing new services, experiences or offerings for guests and exceeding their expectations
- *Team Schwarz Inside*: engagement of all team members in self-improvement and continuous training to encourage development of new team members
- *Green Schwarz Flowers (Grüne Schwarz Blüme)*: development and pursuit of environmental and social actions.

Some other groups were also active in order to prepare team members for specific tasks – for example, trainers to organise team building activities or internal auditors to evaluate the performance of quality achievement. On the other hand, as sustainability was introduced as a principal dimension, one of the first project groups was established, as the hotel manager indicated: “we had a lot of good ideas without the need to spend a lot of money.” The management team also gained the ability to distinguish between long- and short-term actions to plan for various areas of business, such as customer satisfaction, financial situation and investment.

All these practices designed to enable hotel operations to excel under EFQM EM principles created a tacit knowledge and comprehensive know-how for the management to share with other tourism actors in the destination. Their comprehensive understanding of the hotel operations beyond a daily view to a more systematic approach represented critical know-how gained through the efforts of managerial improvement and became a critical reference point for businesses in the region. The aim of the hotel management was to improve the managerial system, meaning that recognition was not the primary goal, as stated by the hotel manager: “this is not an award for customers. They don’t know what it is.” However, the award-winning success gave the property certain recognition, particularly from relevant professionals, businesses and partners. When the property was under assessment for a health certification, the assessor was astonished by the achievement of the hotel as a European Quality Award winner, going far beyond the requirements for ISO certification.

The hotel management did not think of extending the official EFQM EM process upon expiry of recognition after three years because the management believed that a good corporate culture and experience of excellence had been established. The EFQM EM enabled the hotel management to pave the way for and organise managerial processes to obtain ISO certification and maintain the quality of the management and operations. This orientation is similar to that of another hotel business in France (Hotel de Crillon), which used the EFQM EM process to empower team members to set targets for achievement and to make operational decisions leading to a focus on continuous improvement (AFNOR, 2012).

Now that the latest situation at the hotel is monitored on online platforms, their commitment to offering a memorable and excellent experience is evident. The hotel’s TripAdvisor score is five on a five-point scale and it has received ‘best of the best’ recognition from the review site (AlpenResort Schwarz Hotel Reviews, 2020). The hotel management has responded individually to every review, positive and negative, since

February 2016. Moreover, the direct booking channel on the hotel website is effective and mobile responsive with an outstanding display and in-depth content relating to the hotel offerings, as well as a booking engine and request button. All these actions show the innovative tendency of the management to track the latest global trends.

However, the hotel management arguably needs more support in terms of online presence and accessibility in the form of various tools, platforms and channels, including meta search sites, review sites and regionally dominated online booking sites with dynamic rates, to expand their target market, especially in the further afield countries in Asia and the Pacific. Despite the hotel's potential to attract a more profitable international target market, their revenue management perspective and ability remain limited to local and regional dynamics and conditions.

Fortunately, their commitment and dedication to excellence is their primary motivation and strength based on their earnings from the EFQM EM, as indicated by the hotel manager at the end of the interview:

“We always wanted to be here for our guests, to earn money and to pay salaries. But we have learnt how to be efficient and the system helped us a lot. We did not have high targets. We set our targets year by year with achievable increases. We always asked our consultant about what action to take next. We are still on the way and we have lots to improve; then we will look again.”

#### *4.3.2 EFQM award criterion: adding value for customers*

The management described this orientation as “working passionately year round in fulfilling each of the guest's holiday dreams” [EFQM, (2013), p.6]. The customer was at the centre of all operations and customer loyalty was awarded with annual rewards. Moreover, family members were personally involved in direct contact with customers in order to maintain a dynamic relationship. This involvement and customer orientation resulted in consistent increases in customer satisfaction, leading to higher revenue per available room (RevPAR) levels than budgeted figures (EFQM, 2013). “Maintaining happy customers and higher RevPAR” was the objective behind starting and pursuing the hotel's journey towards excellence.

Customer value was based on customer wishes, which were collected and used to increase satisfaction levels. This orientation required process management to improve service processes based on customer feedback. The management was able to collect about 300 customer surveys in a month, including online and offline forms. Online forms were particularly effective for understanding the wishes, needs and expectations of customers and planning improvements in the hotel accordingly. In addition, problematic processes were also identified for quick actions to correct or improve.

Customer feedback was also useful to create new products, offerings and experiences, with additional value leading to more profitable business and higher satisfaction levels. The hotel manager demonstrated this focus with comments on yoga, which was proposed by a customer to offer some relaxation facilities. The property's natural surroundings were appropriate for designing transformative experiences around yoga or other relaxation activities so that customers could acquire a lifetime recreational activity and also be incentivised to return. Systems to monitor those customers who preferred staying in the hotel for a certain activity were developed in order to plan marketing actions in a more personalised way, as the hotel manager explained:

“People talk about what they learn and how it changed their life. So this is the high class of experience. Learning something. We have a lot of information about the use of our activities in terms of how many people do them, how many of them return for this activity or recommend the hotel in this sense. We monitor and report this.”

Investment in a golf club, swimming pools or a farm were among new ideas put forward by the hotel management to create memorable and meaningful experiences for customers, including children. The reason for creating a farm under the control of a mini-club was to increase children’s awareness of the background to their daily lives, making them aware, for example, that milk is produced by cows and eggs come from chickens. AlpenResort Schwarz therefore added value for customers of all ages by designing many experiences based on learning new things for acquisition of a lifelong knowledge or practice.

#### *4.3.3 EFQM award criterion: succeeding through the talent of people*

As indicated, the primary management aim was to improve the organisational structure and management systems. In achieving this aim, the management team put substantial effort into improving human resources processes. These efforts started with the management team with the belief, as the hotel manager asserted, that “we tried to improve our leadership together, we learnt together, we improved our skills together.” In this respect, each department head was set up as the decision-maker and controller of their targets, plans, actions and performance with the assistance of a quality management team. Intensive training programs were initiated and conducted not only to train managers in excellence but also to enable them to train other team members to achieve corporate aims, strategies and goals. One successful tactic was to keep procedures simple so that all team members, especially department heads with their various education levels, could understand, accept and implement actions in the right way.

At the time of interview, the hotel employed 250 team members in total, including approximately 20 department heads, trainees and training program participants (professionals needed to complete a two- to three-year training program in the kitchen and restaurant). Some team members had been employed for a long time in the property, such as the service manager, employed there for 22 years, and the marketing manager, employed for 17 years. The hotel was known as a preferred workplace and an attractive employer for local people, offering leadership and health programs and other initiatives such as bonus points and use of facilities. For this reason, the majority of the team members were locals of the destination.

The main instruments used by the talent management were the communication tools adopted to inform team members about the corporate culture and operational priorities so that they acknowledged the importance of this strategic orientation. The hotel manager emphasised this as follows:

“We did not know anything about policy, strategy, mission, vision. We had no idea of written instruments and papers. We wrote down our vision and mission and published them everywhere for our staff.”

The management also put meetings relating to communication and training into action, including monthly and weekly managerial meetings and weekly departmental meetings. Department heads conducted daily *Blitzlicht* (flashlight) meetings for all team members

for short training sessions or discussion about critical topics such as customer complaints, satisfaction and checklists. These training sessions, organised on a hotel-wide level, were points of contact for all team members, facilitating communication in the operational run. In accordance with strategic goals, department heads in each department arranged annual improvement interviews with each team member. A detailed form was created with reference to the strategic goals (Figure 2), containing open and closed questions on a five-point scale on the following topics:

- *warmth of family*: customer contact, friendliness, teamwork and cooperation, other personal attributes
- *diversity all year round*: knowledge about hotel offerings and team members, new ideas of service and experience
- *sustainability*: pursuit of personal healthcare, waste sorting activity
- *high quality*: pursuit of operations in accordance with checklists, participation in Blitzlicht meetings and Schwarz Academy training sessions.

The model supported a cooperative focus for all team members, enabling them to achieve excellence by means of performance targets and through implementing sustainability, social responsibility and continuous improvement in daily practices, leading to a global quality level for the hotel (AlpenResort Schwarz, 2015). One initiative for all team members was the bonus program, which required collection of points to earn an annual premium. Participation in training, seminars, project group activities, social actions in the village and cooperative work with other departments were some reasons to earn points within this program (AlpenResort Schwarz, 2015). This initiative came from the Team Schwarz Inside project group. Another significant action involved displaying photos and short pieces of information about team members on the walls of a corridor with the highest circulation of customers. The objective of this action was to make customers aware of all team members so their efforts in their workstations could be recognised and appreciated. Thus, all team members in background areas such as kitchen work, dishwashing and laundry also became visible. The requirement for at least two actions per year from each team member became part of the performance and bonus program for another critical project group (Green Schwarz Flowers) and their proposal in action.

Schwarz Academy was established to conduct training programs on various issues and managerial areas. The variety of training in terms of duration, topics and periods was remarkable in that team members had plenty of opportunities to improve their skills. Moreover, hotel management cooperated with local government to conduct training programs and grow professionals into the industry through a range of subjects such as cooking and the kitchen, restaurant service and customer management (AlpenResort Schwarz, 2015). As explained with reference to the various roles in the property, the focus of the hotel management on human resources is evident given plenty of relevant actions. The hotel manager remarked on the belief behind this orientation as follows:

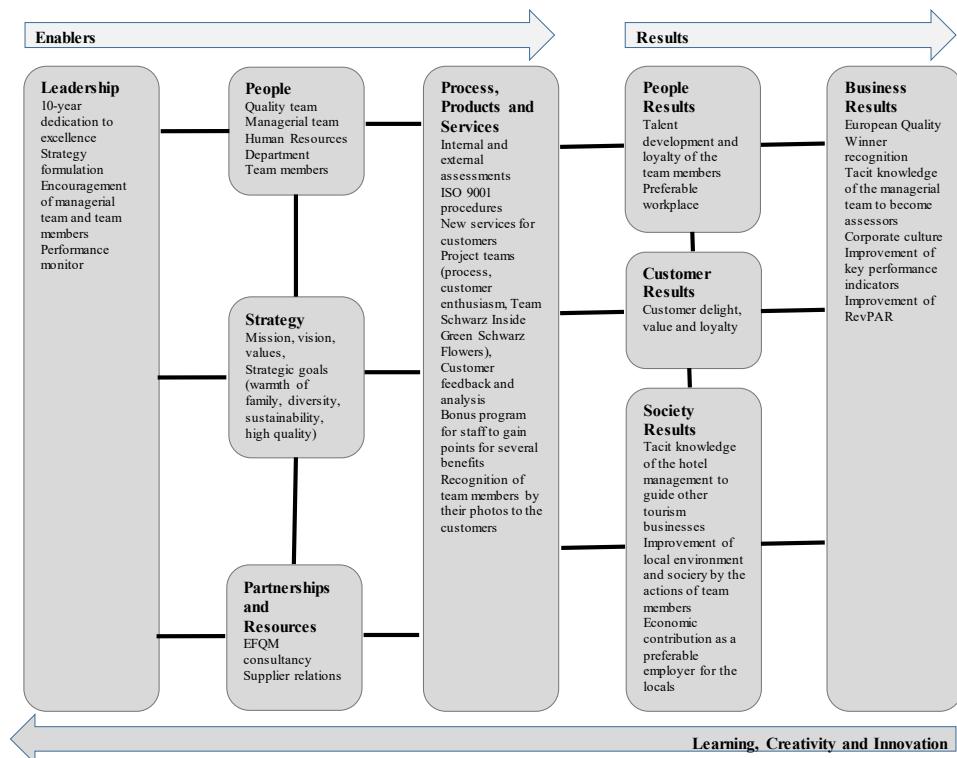
“We did many things for our employees. We knew that we needed to have happy employees for happy guests. This was our principle.”

Based on this motivation, supported by several efforts in action, the hotel management developed know-how in this field by offering a best practice example to tourism establishments in the region looking to make improvement in human resources.

## 5 Discussion

The EFQM EM is a dynamic framework involving all stakeholders with a notable emphasis on sustainability and innovation (EFQM, 2019). The model is generic and applicable to various businesses of different scales, and leads to remarkable improvement of corporate performance (Gómez et al., 2017; Paraschi et al., 2019; Politis and Grigoroudis, 2020). Figure 3 presents a summary of the implementation actions and improvement results in relation to the version of the EFQM EM applied by AlpenResort Schwarz.

**Figure 3** Implementation and results of the EFQM EM in AlpenResort Schwarz (see online version for colours)



As seen in Figure 3, the EFQM EM framework enables hotel businesses to initiate new tools, processes, projects and applications, leading to several impactful results for people, customer, society and business. In the example of AlpenResort Schwarz, efforts to create customer delight and improve the engagement of team members were so effective that the hotel gained recognition and a quality award.

AlpenResort Schwarz's status as a five-star luxury hotel business supports the tendency of hotel owners and management team to offer a property transformed into an experience venue to offer extraordinary experiences beyond excellence, leading to higher rates and returns (Gilmore and Pine, 2002). This focus was set as the hotel's basic strategy in order to design and plan all the hotel processes to integrate and involve all stakeholders into the implementation of excellence, guided by the EFQM EM (Balbastre-Benavent and Canet-Giner, 2011; Saleh and Watson, 2017). Thus, the hotel management could establish a corporate culture based on excellence, led by the top management (Horvitz and Neville, 1996).

This strategy was rooted in a focus on collecting customer data, responsiveness to customer requirements and several human resources practices intended to create customer delight, leading to sustainable relationships with customers and loyalty (Ford et al., 2012; Mandal, 2020). In addition, these efforts were initiated as part of strategy formulation, which required the long-term dedication of all the team members in order to work towards the award over a ten-year period (Metaxas and Koulouriotis, 2014). The entire management team and all the team members in the hotel participated in the decision-making and evaluation process at various levels through interdepartmental cooperation and empowerment (Dahlgård et al., 2019).

As the department conducting quality management implementation in the hotel, the human resources team played a critical role in leading all the other departments to apply EFQM EM principles and developed several distinguished human resources practices to ensure customer delight (Ford et al., 2012; Johnston, 2004; Mandal, 2020). The project teams to which team members were allocated were effective in implementing the essential principles of the excellence approach in terms of process management (Dale et al., 2000; Gómez et al., 2017), creation of customer value (Ford et al., 2012; Johnston, 2004; Vora, 2002) and human resources (Ford et al., 2012; Horvitz and Neville, 1996; Paraschi et al., 2019; Zwetsloot and van Marrewijk, 2004).

As a result of these practices, the hotel achieved the award for creating value for customers and succeeding through the talent of people in 2013. Following the dedication to excellence and EFQM EM implementation, AlpenResort Schwarz could make a remarkable impact by achieving their targeted results (Camisón, 1996; Gómez et al., 2017; Paraschi et al., 2019; Politis and Grigoroudis, 2020). The inclusion of social actions of team members in the performance and rewards process in order to contribute to the social environment of the hotel is proof of the hotel's integration with external stakeholders (Zwetsloot and van Marrewijk, 2004).

AlpenResort Schwarz was the pioneering hotel business of the region and in the Austrian hospitality industry thanks to their engagement with the EFQM EM. The model offered a holistic perspective based on sustainability and consideration of other stakeholders such as local people and sub-contractors. Their understanding of sustainability was established in the early 2000s and included business, environmental and societal components. Before the EFQM EM, the hotel management was not aware of the importance and expectations of suppliers as cooperative partners to create hotel offerings, involving them in improvement actions. Thus, supplier management, as a main contribution of the excellence model (Politis et al., 2009; Zwetsloot and van Marrewijk, 2004) was applicable in the hotel.

Following the push towards excellence, the hotel achieved several results and benefits and noted a remarkable impact on their operations and performance. The hotel managed to improve their managerial systems at the development stage (Gómez et al., 2017). This

improvement and transformation created a management based on modern systems and control tools, leading to more flexible and efficient running of the business with a positive impact on results (EFQM, 2013). A critical impact of this restructuring was the awareness of the hotel management about achievements relating to excellence and the improvement potential of the hotel team (EFQM, 2013). The holistic structure of the model supported a corporate culture of active decision-making and continuous improvement in all operational processes (Dahlgård et al., 2019).

The second major contribution involved the introduction of new performance measures as excellence in hotel businesses can require various performance indicators (Politis et al., 2009; Politis and Grigoroudis, 2020; Rahman et al., 2019; Saunders and Graham, 1992). Key performance indicators such as number of reservations, occupancy rate, monthly or yearly revenues, expenses and profit were always in place. At the stage of creating a balance scorecard based on the strategic goals (Figure 2) for all departments, measures were enhanced. Thus, performance was monitored on a regular basis in all departments by comparing the current situation (realised figures) with the targets (budgeted or planned figures) based on agreement between top management and department heads (Metaxas and Koulouriotis, 2014). The achievement or positive surplus on these targets were rewarded with premiums.

A balance scorecard enabled the monitoring of performance on a more dynamic basis around year-to-date, month-to-date and week-to-date figures. Comparison with past figures became possible and department heads were monitored more actively to use last-minute tactics and actions and keep up with the planned figures. Moreover, some cost items in operational departments such as kitchen costs, staff costs and revenues from rooms and other services, were also included in the scorecard for a more effective evaluation. For example, RevPAR became a key performance indicator as a target for achievement only after 2010 (EFQM, 2013).

Moreover, the EFQM EM transferred an international and intersectoral perspective of the assessment period and a range of experiences from different countries and sectors (EFQM, 2013). The model represents international understanding and congruence of excellence with a clear perspective, a multi-dimensional structure and a summary of definite actions. In addition, six people from the managerial team became assessors to share their knowledge and experiences with other companies from various sectors, collecting their experiences alongside their other work. These assessments were particularly beneficial as a learning opportunity relating to managerial issues in terms of human resources or quality management, making possible some reflections on individual businesses.

## 6 Theoretical implications

Research into excellence, particularly in the management and business context, is in a growing stage (Ghafoor et al., 2020; Hussain et al., 2020; Unnikrishnan et al., 2019). Business excellence, with its multi-dimensional structure, has therefore been proven to be a developing approach, particularly affecting academic and sectoral studies with a potential to improve the quality of businesses and competitive advantage, especially in developing countries (Unnikrishnan et al., 2019). The current study notably reveals the impact and results of implementing this model and filling gaps in the study of business

excellence (Ghafoor et al., 2020). Literature in the fields of tourism and hospitality is scarce, reflecting that business excellence is applicable and impactful in relevant organisations. This study contributes to the existing literature through an insightful analysis of a case study of a hotel business so that distinct features and conditions of hotel businesses implementing the EFQM EM become apparent. Another remarkable finding of the study is the importance of human resources and talent management practices under EFQM EM implementation in creating results for people, customers, society and businesses. More research into various applications is therefore needed in this respect to enable the model to enhance research into excellence and strengthen its impact on the internal and external environment.

## **7 Practical implications**

The findings of this case study of an award-winning hotel business reveal insightful content relating to EFQM EM implementation in a hotel business so that the potential of the model is presented to guide hotels, even in cases of no prior quality management practice. Figure 3 presents several results and benefits that can be achieved by implementing the EFQM EM in hotels. AlpenResort Schwarz managed to extend its managerial capability beyond a traditional family business given the international and intersectoral perspectives deployed in all operations. The model also therefore offers several advantages for independent hotels in implementing international standards to achieve higher quality and returns. Moreover, additional value for customers, supplier management, enhanced human resource practices, talent management, sustainability actions and advanced performance measures were the principal achievements based on the improvement of managerial processes and organisational structure. Despite previous findings (Camisón, 1996), the current study reveals that excellence is applicable, with much success achieved in a resort hotel. This case study verifies that the EFQM EM was developed to compete with quality movements generated from the USA and Japan with a broader scope on sustainability and external stakeholders, including suppliers and society. Moreover, the study also recalls the importance of human resources and talent management practices in offering customer value and improving operational results. The case hotel invested remarkable effort and sources, involving people in innovative projects to engage team members and generate impact for people, customers, society and businesses.

Although several benefits exist to applying excellence practices and the potential of the EFQM EM, which is evident in contributing to forming a sustainable future in accordance with development goals, the hotel industry appears reluctant to adopt such a comprehensive approach (Şanlıöz-Özgen, 2016). This necessity is evident given the final version of the EFQM EM, based on United Nations sustainable development goals, defined to guide governments, businesses and other organisations in developing a sustainable world for all.

## **8 Limitations and suggestions for future research**

The current study has several limitations in representing a foundation for future research. The principal limitation is the availability of a single case to reflect on the excellence

journey in general and the wider experiences of hotel businesses. A longitudinal and more comprehensive case study to monitor excellence applications on the spot with immediate and emerging effect might be encouraging for hotel businesses and policy-makers. One recommendation to facilitate adoption could increasingly be the focus of this research, as well as revision and adaption of the weights of components in accordance with the dynamics of hotel businesses, given that, as the model is a generic approach applicable to all sorts of businesses including manufacturing, with a high difference in the content of offerings from the hospitality sector (Liu and Ko, 2018; Rahman et al., 2019).

Moreover, the case examined in this study showcases the conditions and benefits of the model in a relatively stable tourism region dedicated to certain markets. Future studies with a focus on more volatile regions with higher uncertainty might contribute further to the literature and understandings of excellence, offering an insight into why and how the model can be applicable in these regions to overcome possible unfavourable effects. Moreover, further studies could also examine the reasons for hotel business' reluctance or discouragement of EFQM EM implementation. Such studies of hotel excellence might not have accomplished the processes and could reveal some latent causes or conditions for this reluctance, as well as developing some recommendations so that the potential of hotel businesses is disclosed to help local and regional tourism development in a more sustainable manner.

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