

2024 International Scope. Summary Version.

Les Roches Global Hospitality ILUNION Hotels





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the authors





INNOVATION SPHERE BY LES ROCHES

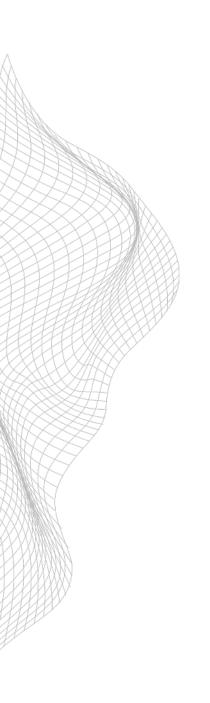


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### Introduction

Innovation has become a cornerstone of success in the hospitality industry, driving hotels to continuously adapt and evolve in response to shifting market demands, technological advancements, and changing guest expectations. As the industry faces an increasingly competitive environment, the ability to innovate effectively is no longer a luxury but a necessity.

The Barometer of Innovation in Hotels has been created by collecting valuable input from industry representatives, including owners, executive directors, and departmental managers from both international hotel brands and independent establishments. This approach ensures that the perspectives reflected in the Barometer include a broad spectrum of the industry, capturing the challenges, strategies, and opportunities that shape innovation in various types of hotels.

Innovation is a necessity for hotels to foresee future trends, customer and employees needs, technologies, in order to adapt and transform organizations



# Objectives of the Study

The study focuses on three main objectives:

- Identify **Discuss** Innovation 1. and **Dimensions.** We explore key dimensions such as change management (adapting to technologies, trends, and expectations), self-organization (independent innovation decision-making), market and and awareness (adapting to market shifts and customer's and employees' needs) in order to inspire a change of mindset around the concept of innovation in the hospitality sector.
- 2. Investigate Strategic Innovation Opportunities. We examine how strategic innovation can enhance a hotel's market position and performance, identifying opportunities like new business models, advanced technologies, and unique services to improve competitiveness.

This feedback from hotel professionals related to innovation and transformation positions, looks to enhance innovation practices within the industry and to provide a structured foundation for future research. This findings are expected to guide hoteliers in refining their strategies and serve as a resource for academics and practitioners exploring innovation in the hotel sector, contributing to a more innovative and competitive industry.

**3. Develop a Framework for Cross-Industry Partnerships.** Recognizing the benefits of collaboration, the study seeks to create a framework for partnerships with other industries, enabling hotels to leverage external expertise for co-creating new services and enhancing guest experiences.



# Summary of Findings

The barometer examines how innovation is adopted in the hotel industry, not only focusing on technology integration and digitalization across operations. This comprehensive shift enhances efficiency, guest experiences, and agility in responding to market demands. Digitalization includes automating front desk operations, improving booking systems, and utilizing data analytics for decision-making and personalized services. By embracing these advancements, hotels can streamline operations, reduce costs, and offer tailored experiences to remain competitive.

# Innovation in hotels is not only driven by technology and digitalization

The study reveals that there is a correlation between the growth of the organization and the evolution of their innovation strategy, which larger brands often having more resources and formal structures to support innovation initiatives.

However, we also identify that there is an area of improvement particularly in advancing innovation leadership at the top of the management level.

Strategically, hotels align innovation with business practices to stay responsive to market opportunities. A management model has been developed to **integrate innovation into business strategies**, fostering a forward-thinking approach for achieving long-term goals like market expansion, enhanced brand positioning, and improved customer engagement.

Besides **strategy**, other levers that hotels must consider in their innovation plans are **technology**, **structure and processes**, **an innovation ecosystem**, **and innovation culture and competitive intelligence**. The **communication** of all these initiatives also plays an important role in the overall innovation approach that the hotel must consider.



Key findings reveal an **86% correlation between strategic innovation and changes in hotel brand size**, indicating that as brands grow, their approach to innovation evolves, often with more resources and structures. The study also identifies areas for improvement, particularly in fostering innovation leadership at the top management level.

Additionally, the study stresses the need to address human resources and operational challenges by investing in training programs, empowering staff to contribute to a culture of continuous innovation.

Another significant finding is **the importance of creating an innovation ecosystem through partnerships with startups, research institutions, and educational organizations**. These collaborations help identify synergies, access research, and co-create new solutions, enhancing innovation and keeping up with technological advances. This approach strengthens hotels' innovation capacity and fosters a more interconnected, dynamic industry.

**Each of these areas plays a crucial role in shaping how hotel companies innovate**, with varying degrees of success and challenges that reflect the complex nature of driving innovation in a competitive industry.



# Methodology Overview

The study used structured questionnaires to collect data from key decision-makers in the hotel industry, including owners, executive directors (CEOs, CIOs, General Managers), and departmental managers responsible for innovation. The sample included 12 different international hotel chains, each with an average portfolio of over 100 properties, and 5 independent hotels, offering a comparative view of innovation between large brands and standalone establishments.

The methodology provides an understanding of how innovation is managed and executed across branded and independent hotels, revealing differences in strategies

Descriptive statistical methods were applied to analyze the data, summarizing trends, patterns, and insights from the responses. This analysis highlights dominant innovation practices, the involvement of different managerial roles, and the impact on hotel performance.



# Company Profiles

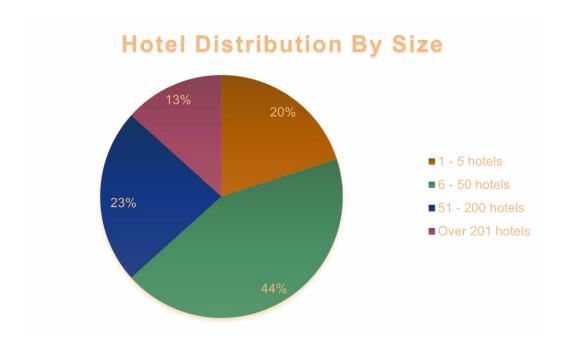
The study gathered responses from a range of hotel professionals overseeing innovation, with 65% from small and medium-sized brands. These respondents were primarily top-level executives (CEOs, CIOs, General Managers), highlighting that innovation in smaller hotels is often driven by executive leadership. This approach allows for streamlined decision-making and faster implementation of new ideas but requires leaders to balance operational duties with strategic innovation.

# Study Respondents Innovation Director Chief Information Officer Chief Executive Officer/General Manager/Owner Innovation/Technology Departamental Manager

Figure: "Respondents' Position in the Company" – decision-making roles.

The emphasis on executive involvement reflects the unique challenges and opportunities of smaller hotels, which typically lack dedicated innovation teams found in larger chains. **Only 10% of respondents were designated innovation directors**, suggesting that while some small hotels are formalizing innovation leadership, many still rely on broader executive oversight.

A significant portion of innovation responsibilities also lies with department managers, especially in sales and marketing, training and HR, and IT. Sales and marketing managers drive promotional strategies and customer engagement, training and HR managers develop staff skills and culture, and IT managers implement new technologies to enhance operations and guest experiences. This cross-functional approach to innovation indicates that multiple departments contribute to fostering a culture of continuous improvement across the hotel.



Overall, the study underscores the vital role of executive leadership in small and medium-sized hotels, revealing a trend towards formalizing innovation processes and a broad integration of innovation across various operational areas.

# Innovation Strategy

The study found that medium-sized hotel brands had the highest level of innovation strategy implementation, scoring 4.23 out of 5. Positioned between smaller agile operations and larger resource-heavy enterprises, these brands effectively balance flexibility and resources, allowing for quick adoption of new technologies and service enhancements aligned with strategic goals.

# Medium-sized brands scored highest for implementing innovation strategies

### **Innovation Strategy**

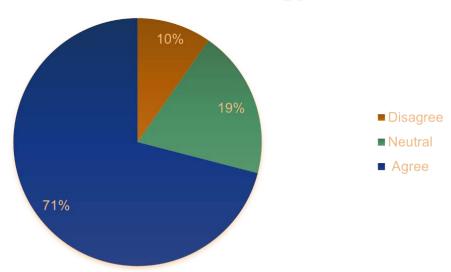


Figure: "Innovation strategy in the company" – "Does your hotel company have a clearly defined strategy to promote innovation to achieve strategic goals?"

Large international hotel chains scored 3.73, close to the overall average of 4.23, indicating solid implementation of innovation strategies. While they possess significant resources, expertise, and market influence, their size can create challenges, such as slower decision-making, organizational silos, and maintaining consistency across many properties. Despite these complexities, large chains leverage structured programs, dedicated innovation teams, and investments in technology to align innovation with broader business strategies.

In contrast, small hotel chains, with a score of 3.14, face challenges in fully embedding innovation due to limited resources, smaller teams, and tighter budgets. However, they often excel in targeted areas of innovation that strongly resonate with their specific customer base, despite constraints on large-scale initiatives.

Larger hotels were more successful in product/service innovation, scoring up to 2.66, compared to 1.28 in smaller chains. For operational innovations, small and medium brands had similar implementations, averaging 0.85, while larger brands excelled with a score of 1.66, showing effective optimization of operations.

Management practice innovation was identified as having the most potential for growth. Although 70% of participants had implemented some form of innovation in this area, only 12% deemed it satisfactory or high-level, highlighting a gap between intention and execution. Small brands reported no development in management innovation (score of 0), while large international chains scored 1.33, suggesting that despite room for growth, larger hotels are more adept at modernizing their management practices to foster innovation.

# Leadership and Implementation of Innovation

Over 50% of companies mentioned that they are proactive in innovation implementation.

Over half of the respondents stated that their companies proactively implement innovation, looking to position themselves as market leaders or early adopters within the hotel industry

These hotels introduce new technologies, services, and practices ahead of competitors, aiming to set industry standards and differentiate themselves. This commitment to innovation enhances their market reputation, with significant investments in research and development, exploration of trends, and a willingness to take calculated risks to maintain their pioneering status.

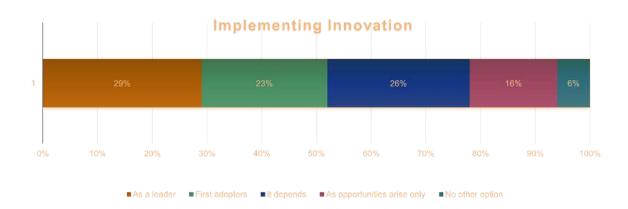
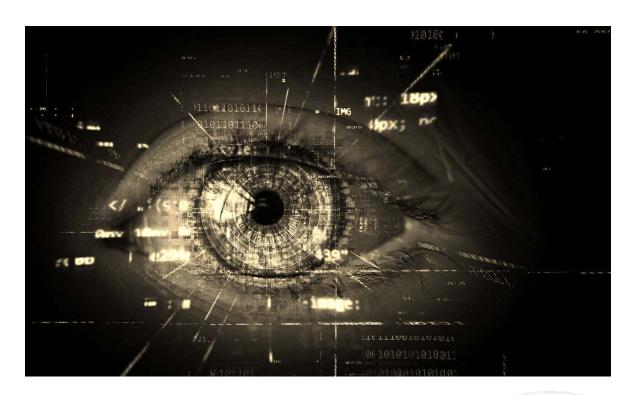


Figure: "Innovation implementation in the company"

Other respondents (over 30%) take a more cautious approach, carefully evaluating the best opportunities before implementing new practices. These hotels prioritize finding the right balance between innovation investment and effective management of current operations. They adopt new technologies after observing the successes and failures of market leaders, focusing on clear evidence of value and return on investment.

The remaining respondents view innovation as necessary to match industry standards rather than as a strategic priority. For these hotels, innovation is adopted primarily as a defensive measure when it becomes crucial for survival in a competitive market. Their focus is on maintaining parity with competitors rather than leading trends, seeing innovation as a means to meet guest and stakeholder expectations rather than a transformative business strategy.



### Market Driven Innovation

The market, with an average score of 3.93, is the main driver of innovation for hoteliers, highlighting how hotels closely track market trends, consumer demands, and competitor actions to shape their innovation strategies. This market-centric approach allows hotels to stay aligned with or ahead of expectations, guiding their product offerings, operational processes, and overall business strategy.

# Most hotels recognize market demand as a driver for innovation efforts

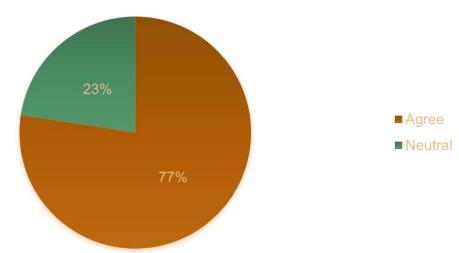
Small and medium-sized hotel brands excel in leveraging market opportunities, scoring 4.00 and 4.07, respectively. Their agility and flexibility enable them to quickly respond to market changes, aided by less bureaucratic structures that allow for fast decision-making and quick pivots. This adaptability gives them an advantage, as they can test new ideas with lower risk and tailor their offerings to target audiences more effectively.



Large hotel chains also show a strong focus on market-driven innovation, with an average score of 3.75. While these chains face more complex structures and slower decision-making than smaller brands, their extensive resources and global reach help them **respond effectively to market signals**. They utilize data analytics, market research, and customer feedback across their networks to identify trends. Though their response might be slower, they can implement innovations on a broader scale, often setting industry standards for others. This balance of strategic planning and responsiveness ensures large chains remain competitive in the evolving hospitality landscape.

Figure: "Innovation matching market opportunities" – illustrates the influence of market trends on innovation strategies.



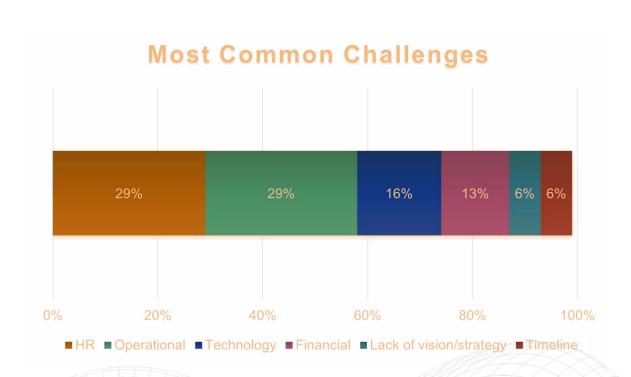


# Challenges to Innovation

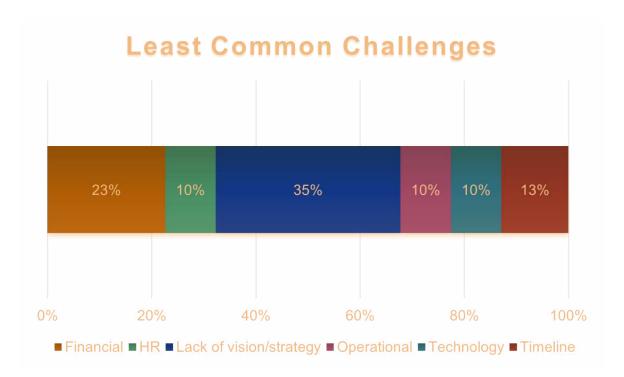
The analysis of human and operational challenges across hotel chains of various sizes reveals that smaller and medium-sized chains face significantly greater struggles compared to larger chains.

# Main perceived challenges include lack of incentives and dedicated innovation leadership

Both human resources and operational requirements accounted for 29% of the reasons for not achieving desired innovation levels. In contrast, lack of vision (35%) and financial commitments (23%) were the least cited barriers, suggesting that hoteliers generally feel confident in their strategic vision and have sufficient financial backing to explore innovation.



Figures above and below: "Most Common and Least Common Innovation Challenges" – human and operational constraints.



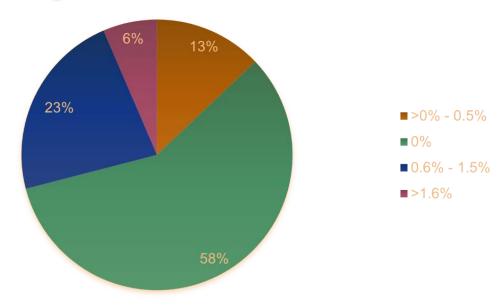
**Challenges vary depending on the hotel size**, as organizational structure plays a key role in shaping the level and nature of these challenges. Smaller and medium-sized hotels often encounter more obstacles in implementing innovation due to their size and resource constraints.

# Budget Allocation for Innovation

Nearly 60% of respondents indicated that their brand does not allocate a specific budget for innovation at all. However, **those who have a dedicated budget indicate that these initiatives are driven by executive leaders**.

Notably, none of the largest hotel chains have a dedicated innovation budget. In contrast, 40% of small hotels and up to 71% of medium-sized hotels allocate funds for innovation, with the medium sector leading in investment.

### **Budget Dedicated to Innovation**



- Figure: "Total Brand Budget Dedicated to Innovation (2023)"

# Training and Development in Innovation

The survey revealed a **significant gap in innovation training** within the hotel industry, with 44% of participants stating their companies do not offer "structured training" for innovation. This missed opportunity suggests many hotels may lack the staff skills and knowledge necessary to encourage a culture of innovation, with the potential risk of stagnation and lost chances for process improvements, enhanced guest experiences, and competitive advantage.

**Innovation training empowers employees to think creatively**, adopt new technologies, and align with company goals, integrating innovation into daily operations. Only 25% of managers reported their hotel companies provide specific innovation training, highlighting the limited reach of current efforts.

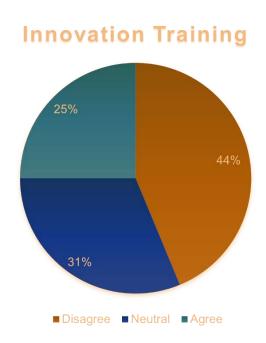
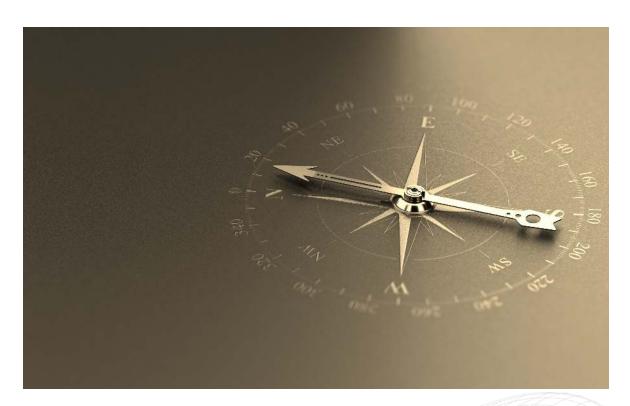


Figure 16: "Innovation Training" – existence of structured training programs

The lowest levels of training were found in small hotel brands (those with fewer than five properties), often constrained by limited budgets and resources. Conversely, medium brands (those with under 50 hotels) and large international chains reported higher averages for innovation training, leveraging their larger scale to integrate structured programs.

Medium-sized hotel brands have a key opportunity to enhance their innovation capabilities through targeted training initiatives, focusing on employee development, creative thinking, and problem-solving to compete more effectively with both agile small hotels and resource-heavy large chains. Overall, the data suggests that hotels of all sizes should prioritize developing training programs that encourage creativity, adaptability, and continuous improvement, equipping teams to drive innovation effectively.



# Partnerships and Ecosystem Building

In numerous studies about innovation and its implementation in companies, it is repeatedly highlighted the importance of partnerships with startups and educational institutions and how this collaboration can enhance the forward-thinking of any organization.

### **Collaboration with Institutions**

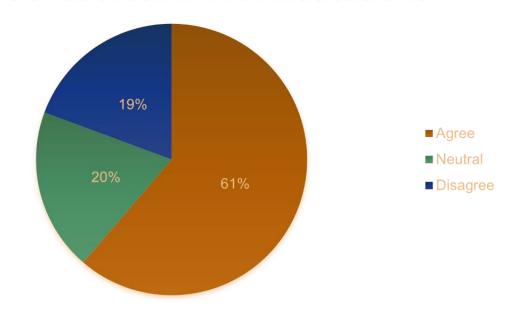
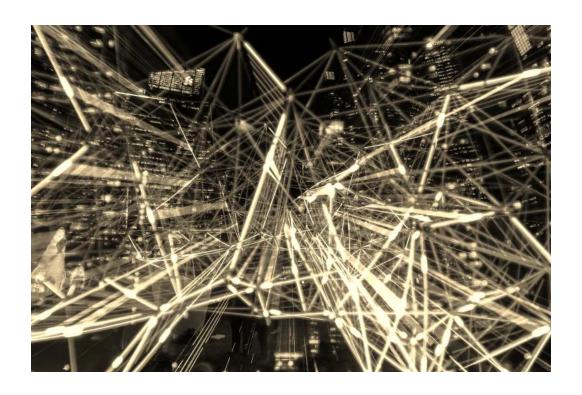


Figure 19: "Collaboration with Institutions" – shows the level of collaboration and innovation research

Creating dedicated business functions for innovation research and development can significantly enhance hotel operations, ensuring that exploring new ideas and technologies is a continuous strategic priority. **A key opportunity identified is collaborating with industry representatives**, scoring 3.67 out of 5, to co-create innovative solutions and explore technological advancements. These collaborations with technology providers, academic institutions, and industry experts enable hotels to share resources, accelerate development, and stay at the forefront of industry trends, enhancing both operational efficiency and guest experiences.

Small hotel companies (those with under 50 properties) scored 3.92 out of 5 for developing collaborative research initiatives, successfully partnering with research and educational institutions to leverage expertise and drive innovation. Their agility and flatter structures allow them to quickly implement research findings into market-ready innovations. Medium-sized hotels (scoring 3.57/5) and large chains (scoring 3) face more challenges in implementing collaborative initiatives due to the need to balance scaling operations with maintaining focus on innovation. Large chains, in particular, encounter complexities like slow decision-making and bureaucratic hurdles, leading to innovation silos and less effective collaborations.

Less than 50% of respondents reported the willingness or capability to partner with startups, averaging 3.54/5. This low engagement indicates missed opportunities for fresh perspectives and agile innovation. A significant 65% of respondents experienced difficulties building an innovation ecosystem with external organizations like startups and research institutions, often due to differing cultures, unclear collaboration frameworks, and logistical barriers. While partnerships with startups can bring rapid technological advancements, many hotels struggle to integrate these effectively into operations.

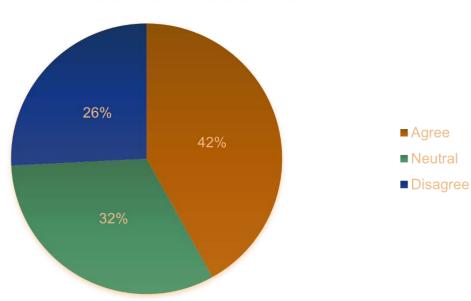


Overall, only 48% of companies successfully leverage innovation insights and competitive intelligence from other industries. Smaller brands (fewer than five properties, scoring 3.85 out of 5) and medium-sized brands (under 200 hotels, scoring 4.0 out of 5) show greater openness to external knowledge, adapting quickly and easily engaging with startups. In contrast, **the largest hotel chains score below the average in collaborating with startups** (under 3.0 out of 5), hindered by bureaucratic complexities, slower decision-making, and risk aversion. This presents a critical opportunity for large chains to improve innovation strategies by fostering flexible partnerships, breaking down internal silos, and embracing a startup-friendly culture to explore new ideas and technologies beyond traditional hospitality boundaries.

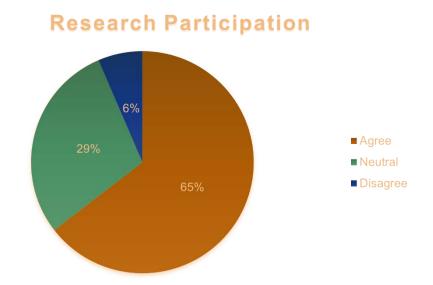
# Research and Insights

Engaging in internal research, scoring an average of 3 out of 5, offers hotel companies a key opportunity to adapt to market changes and leverage emerging trends. Hotels use existing resources—like data analytics, customer feedback, and staff insights—to explore new ideas, test innovations, and develop solutions that meet evolving market demands. Investing in internal research creates a self-sustaining innovation ecosystem, where hotels can gather, analyze, and apply insights to improve services, streamline operations, and to identify new revenue streams.

### **Internal Research**

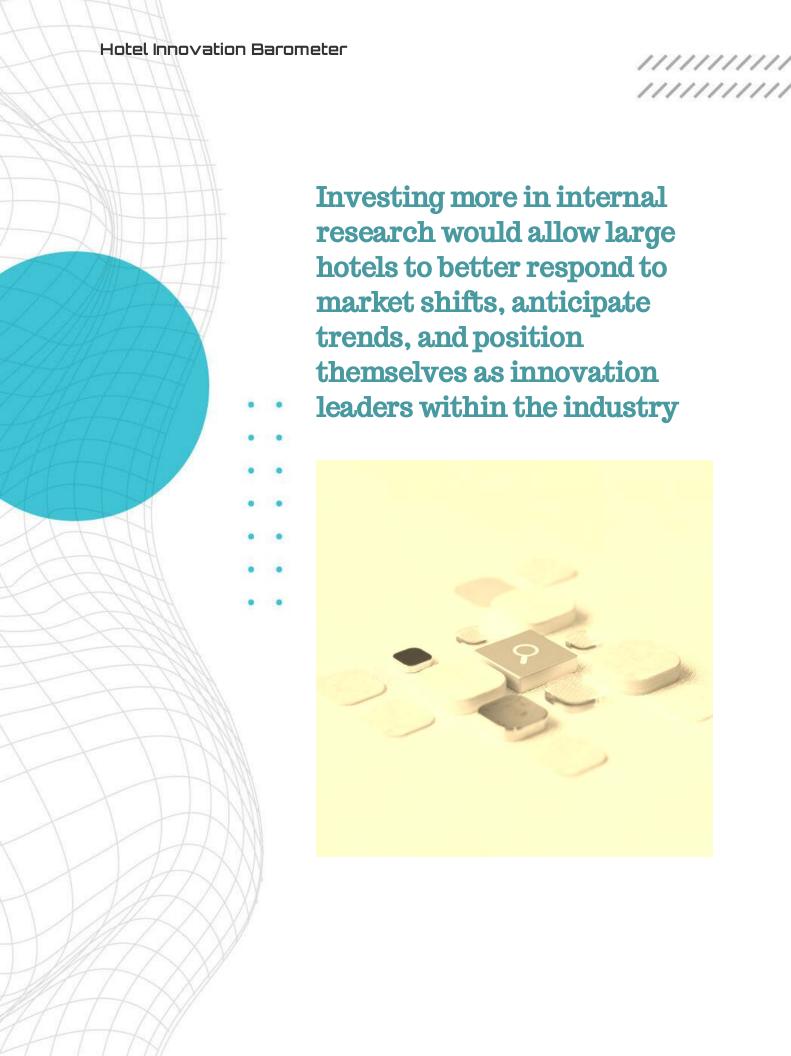


Figures: "Internal Research" and "Participation in Research" – focus on research efforts and hotel interest



Small and medium-sized hotel brands, with averages of 3.42 out of 5 and 3.23 out of 5, are especially active in internal research. **Small hotels benefit from their ability to experiment on a smaller scale and quickly refine strategies**, often targeting niche markets, unique guest experiences, or specialized offerings. For medium-sized hotels, internal research supports identifying best practices, optimizing operations, and strategic market expansion, leveraging data and insights to gain a competitive advantage.

In contrast, large international hotel chains, despite their extensive resources, scored a slightly lower average of 3.00 out of 5, indicating untapped potential in internal research. These brands have access to vast data and expertise but face challenges in coordinating efforts across regions and departments, as well as slower decision-making processes due to their scale. By prioritizing and improving internal research, large chains can uncover insights that drive innovation, enhance guest services, and maintain competitiveness.



# Conclusion and Next Steps

The study shows that there are other aspects of innovation that are not as developed in the strategies of hotel companies as digitalization. Therefore, it is essential that hotel companies define innovation strategies to have a roadmap, the structure within their organization to implement the strategy, methodology and processes that must be applied to be more efficient in innovation projects, and intelligence processes. They have to be competitive to understand the environment and adapt to changes quickly, effectively communicate innovation actions internally and externally, enhance the internal culture of innovation (incentives, training) and develop an open ecosystem not only focused on digital partners, but also including organizations public institutions, research centers, universities, startups/scaleups and educational institutions for professionals.

# Innovation is mostly driven by technology and strategic market alignment, but it still needs leadership, training and partnerships to evolve

Strategically, hotels leverage innovation to capitalize on market opportunities, with management models increasingly based on strategic innovation. An 86% correlation was found between strategic innovation and hotel brand size, indicating that larger brands are more likely to adopt structured approaches to innovation, supported by their resources and technology access. This also suggests that **smaller brands can benefit from scaling their innovation efforts as they grow**, highlighting the need for an evolving strategic framework.

A critical area for development is the establishment of innovation leadership at the top management level. Effective leadership is crucial for a unified approach to innovation. To address human resource and operational challenges, the study stresses the importance of training programs focusing on innovative practices. Equipping employees with the right skills fosters a culture where new ideas and continuous improvements are encouraged.

Additionally, the study emphasizes **forming partnerships with external organizations like startups, research institutions, and educational bodies**. These collaborations help hotels access new technologies, co-create solutions, and identify synergies, enhancing their innovation capabilities beyond internal possibilities and staying ahead of trends.

In the present context of global uncertainty and transformation of the hotel tourism sector, innovation is presented as a key strategic variable to be able to respond to the challenges of the hotel sector, which is called to be increasingly sustainable, more efficient, more competitive and offer new experiences to the customer and the employee. **The hotel sector must increase the prominence of innovation as a framework for action**, turning it into a key promoting element for business transformation, making use of technology and digitalization as pillars that support the implementation of innovation.

This study's relevance is emphasized by the feedback from industry professionals: 87% of the participants requested the report, 48% expressed interest in follow-up discussions, and 65% sought a comparison of their company's results with the final report. This interest in benchmarking and continuous learning demonstrates the study's value as a resource for guiding innovation efforts and fostering collaborative improvement across the industry.

# The Team Behind The Study

#### Carlos Bello

Carlos Bello is the Director of Innovation and Technology at ILUNION Hotels, where he spearheads the company's transformative journey through the development of new business models, products, processes, and services. He fosters a culture of open and interdisciplinary innovation with stakeholders, driving the initiative "Innovation with Purpose" (#InnovACTION) to achieve the mission of "Building a better world with everyone included." With a strong international strategic background, Carlos combines innovation management with business acumen to drive the transformation of companies. Before joining ILUNION Hotels, Carlos held several leadership roles, including Director of Innovation and Sustainability at Iberdrola Inmobiliaria, Head of European R+D+i Projects at Iberdrola, and Director of Innovation at LEAD Innovation. He is also an expert advisor on innovation to the European Commission and a certified mentor for European startups. Carlos holds degrees from Instituto de Empresa, Illinois Institute of Technology (IIT), the University of Oslo, and ESADE

#### Susana Garrido

Susana Garrido is the Director of Innovation and EdTech at Les Roches Marbella and was recently appointed as the Director of the Spark X Foundation. She has been a Clinical Professor of Marketing and Management, teaching marketing at Les Roches Marbella since 2012. Susana holds an MBA from the San Telmo International Institute, a Postgraduate Degree in Digital Business, a degree in Translation and Interpreting, and a Postgraduate Degree in Golf Course Management. Before joining Les Roches, Susana gained extensive professional experience in Spain and the United States, including her role as Hotel and Spa Director at a five-star golf resort in southern Spain. She is also an author, having published a book in 2017 on globalization and small businesses, and she continues to share her expertise through a blog and podcast.

#### Guillermo Marsal

Guillermo Marsal is a seasoned hospitality professional with over 20 years of international experience across diverse hotel settings, including hotel management, corporate strategic planning, and innovation. His broad experience has equipped him with the skills to navigate complex challenges and drive success in dynamic environments, making him an asset to any organization. Guillermo's commitment to continuous learning and professional growth is evident in his academic achievements, including a degree from Bath Spa University College, a postgraduate qualification, and an Executive MBA from ESIC in Madrid. In addition to his extensive professional background, Guillermo has also made significant contributions to the academic field, with three years of teaching experience in subjects such as Digital Marketing, Technology, and new business models. His passion for education and mentorship has allowed him to share his insights and inspire the next generation of hospitality leaders. Currently, Guillermo serves as the IT Manager at ILUNION Hotels, where he leverages his strategic vision and technological expertise to enhance the company's IT infrastructure and support its ongoing commitment to innovation. His role involves overseeing the integration of new technologies, optimizing digital strategies, and ensuring that ILUNION Hotels remains at the forefront of industry advancements

#### **Marius Vlad**

Marius Vlad is the Academic Research Responsible and Senior Lecturer at Les Roches Marbella, where he teaches research methods to undergraduate students, guides honors students in completing their dissertations, and coordinates applied research for master's students. Since 2013, he has been teaching a variety of Rooms Division operations and management courses to both undergraduate and master's students, bringing a strong focus on academic rigor and practical application. Marius's extensive industry experience spans training and operations in 5-star independent properties, chain hotels, and institutions across Greece, the United States, Switzerland, the United Arab Emirates, P.R. China, and his home country, Romania. His global background and expertise enrich his teaching, providing students with valuable insights into the diverse aspects of hotel management. Marius holds postgraduate and Master's Degrees in Business Administration, further complementing his academic and professional credentials.

# Les Roches Global Hospitality

Les Roches' Mission is to deliver transformative education that combines high quality, research-led academic learning with real-world hospitality industry exposure. We endeavor to develop in our students attributes such as empathy, problem solving, and teamwork which are strong assets in the modern workplace. Our campuses each provide a caring and compassionate environment which stimulates personal growth, intercultural fluency, and a commitment to a sustainable future.

Through Spark, we're building a global sphere to foster hospitality innovation, including preincubation and incubation services for startups which are bringing disruptive thinking to our industry and inspiration to our students. We're inviting students, alumni and industry partners to develop and test new hospitality solutions in living laboratories on campus.



Spark is also being embedded across our entire academic curriculum, putting innovation and entrepreneurship at the heart of the Les Roches Way of Life.

### **ILUNION Hotels**

Hotels is the hotel division of the ONCE
Social Group, a unique model in the world
that seeks to promote sustainable,
innovative, responsible, inclusive and
accessible tourism. It has a team of 1,800
people, 41% of whom have some type of
disability and 10% of the employees belong to
vulnerable clusters; as well as 31
establishments spread throughout Spain,
which have universal accessibility certification
(UNE 170001-2) and the BREEAM seal, which
guarantees the sustainability of the buildings.

It has been the first company in the sector to obtain the EFQM 600+ European Seal of Excellence, awarded by the Club of Excellence in Management in recognition of its business model and management. In addition, they apply the concept of Innovation with Purpose, where stakeholders are a fundamental part of the company's cocreation process.



ILUNION Hotels has participated in the creation of this barometer by providing its vision, the concept of Innovation with Purpose, the innovation methodology to define the conceptualisation of the interview and the report, as well as its sector knowledge and network of contacts.

WILLING TO PARTICIPATE IN THE NEXT EDITION to know how innovation is enhancing hotel transformation and get a comparison of your company results? If your company is interested in exploring future research work, partnerships, or would like to share your practices with future hospitality leaders, participate in the second Innovation Barometer of the Hotel sector that will be organized in 2025, may send an email to spark@lesroches.es

### Acknowledgements:

Special thanks to all the participants in this first Innovation Barometer of the Hotel Sector, because with their contribution to the survey, we will inspire other hotel leaders about how to implement innovation strategies.



