

# Hotel industry: navigating the impact of COVID-19

Surviving, adapting, and preparing for the new normal

2020





# Introduction

The hotel industry is dealing with an unprecedented crisis due to the disruption caused by the global COVID-19 pandemic. With hotels shut or operating at severely reduced capacity and with customers in lockdown, we look at the steps businesses can take to not only survive but put themselves in the best position for reopening.

From liquidity to debt and restructuring, we address the diverse and complex challenges hotel owners and operators face. In this report we consider the implications for employers and how financial planning for the medium and long term will be affected.

We will cover:



Liquidity



Employment



Debt and  
restructuring



Financial planning  
and reporting



Preparing for  
re-opening



What Grant Thornton is  
doing to help hoteliers

# The challenges posed by COVID-19

The global disruption resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic is unprecedented. Previously, localized events such as hurricanes have led to long-term closures. Now both global and regional chains, as well as independent operators, are facing severe cash flow pressures. The first half of 2020 saw a widespread drop off in occupancy rates around the world. In May 2020, New York occupancy rates were 80% below what we would have expected to see, with many hotels temporarily closed.

The challenges created by COVID-19 impact almost every part of a hotel's operations, from room occupancy levels and staffing plans, to food and beverage provisioning. The pandemic has the potential to have far-reaching effects on the industry, long past the lifting of travel restrictions and regional lockdowns. Your priorities will depend on the size and structure of your business, as well as your current financial position and long-term strategy.

## Liquidity

The immediate challenge for hotel owners and operators has been cash flow management and forecasting. Businesses that were well capitalized with healthy balance sheets have a distinct advantage when it comes to withstanding a sharp drop in revenue, and a potentially longer-term period of depressed demand. For hotel managers and owners, the focus will be on increasing liquidity and reducing cash requirements. This will necessitate a thorough examination of all pre-COVID expenditure.

There are a number of factors that make cash flow forecasting difficult in the current climate. Firstly, what will happen once lockdown and travel restrictions are lifted is still unclear. We may have a period of muted demand as cautious consumers stay away, and the continuation of social distancing measures, requiring reduced room occupancy and increased cleaning costs could significantly impact revenue and operating costs. Business occupancy could lag behind leisure occupancy.

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as companies decide to continue to limit travel and conduct meetings virtually. Secondly, many businesses across the sector are currently utilizing government support to pay wages and fixed costs. With the situation evolving quickly, it is not certain how long this assistance will be available and at what scale.

## Employment

Many hotel operators have been able to scale down their labor costs significantly through reduced hours, or the use of government support to furlough sections of their staff. The boost this provided to liquidity has been hugely beneficial to large parts of the industry, but also creates a number of potential issues. We are working with owners and operators to create strategies for reopening, by looking at their ROI and determining what staff levels they need to retain to operate profitably.

With fewer staff in all parts of the business, internal control considerations need to be a priority for management teams. The hierarchy of responsibility may be different, but it is critical that internal procedures for approval and risk management are still effective. Evidence documenting approvals may look different to those pre-COVID due to virtual conversations, and electronic reviews as a result of increasing levels of homeworking.

## Debt and restructuring

With revenue and resulting cash flow diminished for both owners and operators, it is important to quickly identify those items where available funds may not be sufficient to meet obligations. For instance, entering into early and transparent negotiations may be necessary to find constructive solutions for servicing debt obligations which may be due, or restructuring other costs which may be committed at levels no longer commensurate with the future operating levels of the business. Many lenders and financiers are accepting delays in payment, and may be open to a further renegotiation of terms.

We expect that a large number of hotel owners may be looking to restructure their debts, meaning that private equity owners and larger operators with significant cash reserves may begin looking to make acquisitions. Companies looking to restructure will need to be able to demonstrate the viability of their plan to internal and external stakeholders and show that it is the best option to ensure the business is able to continue operating once restrictions are lifted. Hotel bars and restaurants need to be considered carefully, as these could be impacted significantly for a longer period of time by ongoing social distancing measures.



## Financial planning and reporting

For most of the sector, financial reporting and planning for 2020 is going to differ substantially from previous years. Governments all over the world have implemented a range of measures relating to financial assistance and temporary tax relief. The dynamic nature of the pandemic means that governments are adapting their strategies regularly, so it is important that hotel owners and operators are aware of this support and taking full advantage of the assistance available. Not only will COVID-19 lead to asset impairment considerations that will need to be assessed for reporting and covenant purposes, but companies will also need to assess how the pandemic and government support will impact going concern considerations associated with future cash flows and earnings.

## Preparing for reopening

While survival is the overriding concern of many in the hotel industry, it is also important to prepare for the medium and long-term. Once travel restrictions and internal lockdowns begin to be lifted, hotels could still be required to operate at reduced occupancy due to social distancing. This reduced revenue could be further impacted by increased costs relating to cleaning and other activities. Using ROI to determine exactly how many rooms are needed to remain in operation should underpin any strategy.

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Across many markets, hotels are expected to implement updated health and safety procedures, especially with regards to cleaning processes and techniques. Making this revised strategy known as early as possible can help smooth the transition once the doors are reopened; this communication will be particularly important with regards to furloughed staff. Some operators, particularly in the business segment, may choose to bring forward the introduction of digital and remote services such as mobile check-in. Hotel brands, however, may feel that these solutions negatively impact the kind of customer experiences they aim to create.

COVID-19 has forced businesses in all industries to adapt their working practices, with home working and video conferences becoming increasingly important. It remains to be seen whether companies continue to use these practices to lower costs after travel restrictions are lifted. The conference market could be affected over the medium-term, leading to a slower recovery of the business market than leisure market. The low-cost travel market could be affected by a rise in airline prices or the need to reduce occupancy rates for a sustained period of time. Operators and owners need to plan for these potential variances in demand as the world begins to return to pre-crisis levels of activity.



## Critical considerations for your response

The value chain of the hotel industry is highly interconnected with other industry groups as well as domestic and global economic and social activity. Many of the forces impacting the hotel industry are driven by factors outside of the owner, franchisor or operator's control; this complexity has been highlighted by the impact of COVID-19.

Current market conditions are driving clear liquidity and operational challenges, but can also provide opportunities to those with strong balance sheets and access to supportive lenders and investors. The interconnectivity of the hotel industry drives the need for well thought-through, integrated solutions that critically address the needs of multiple stakeholders.

We consider the questions on the next page as some of the more important areas to focus on for the industry when looking to assess, protect and restore value – some will be more relevant to your business than others. Grant Thornton can help you to define the next steps in your response.

## Key questions to consider

### Assess



#### Liquidity, refinancing and communicating the plan

- How much time does my business have before covenants are breached/liquidity runs out?
- How can I effectively manage liquidity, what sources of short-term finance/funding are available? What options are available to restructure my existing debt obligations?
- How can pinch points created by large cash outflows such as management and franchise fees and debt service/repayments be managed/renegotiated?
- What sources of finance are available (including government support) and how do I access them at speed and at the right price?
- What is the turnaround plan, how can this be best positioned and negotiated with my stakeholders?
- What is the right communication strategy for my people, customers, suppliers and financial stakeholders?



#### Operations and performance improvement

- How will I restart operations effectively and attract business?
- How can I retain the people critical to my business?
- How can I make the business as operationally efficient as possible given likely lower occupancy and RevPAR levels in the short to medium term?



#### Taking advantage of opportunities

- Are there any attractive investment opportunities driven by market conditions?
- How can I position myself to be ready to take advantage of these opportunities?



#### Governance, risk and compliance

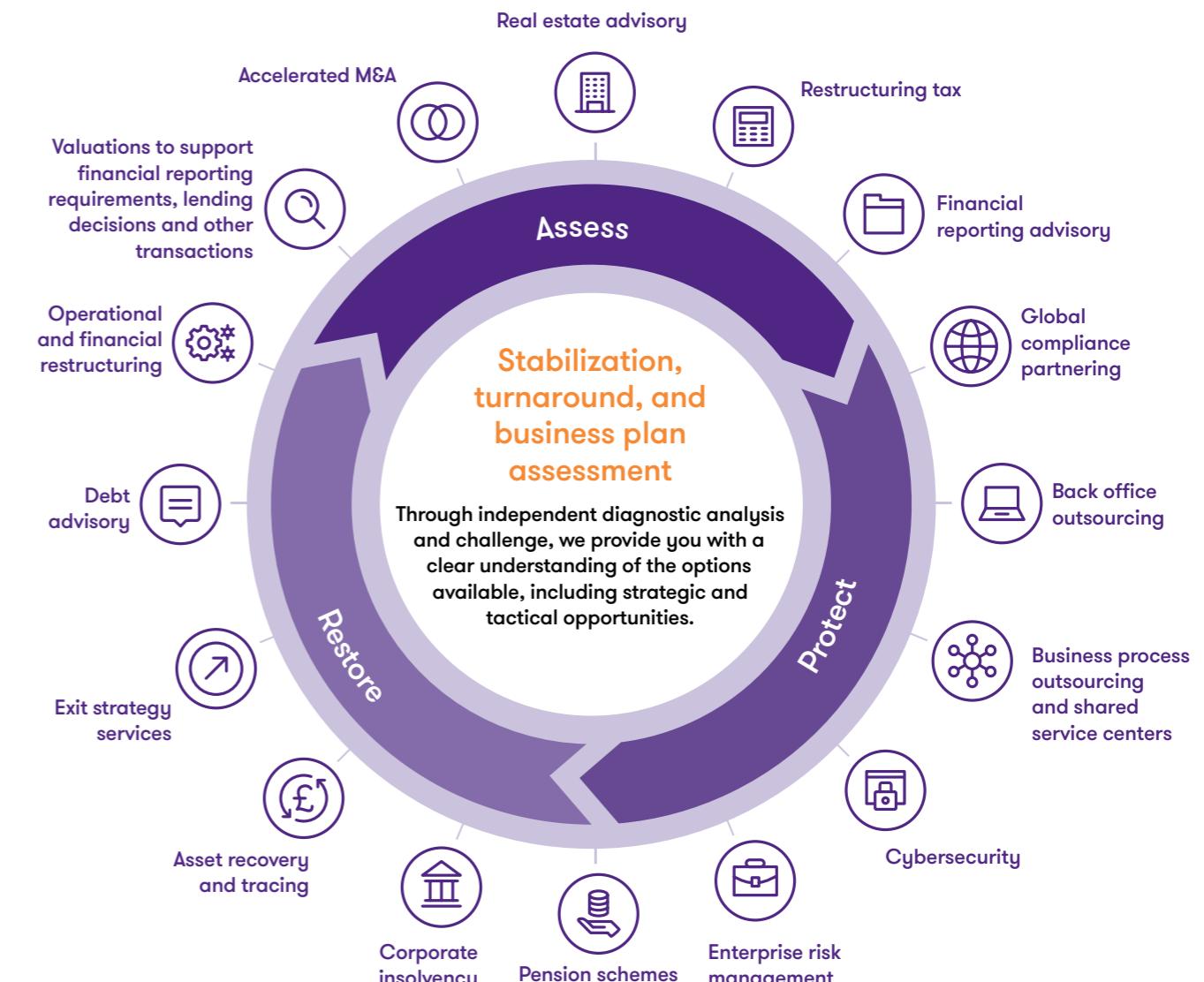
- How can the brand's reputation be protected?
- What risk does the 'new normal' for working remotely and delivering services bring to the business?
- Is my cybersecurity strategy robust?
- Is my internal control environment still strong?



## How Grant Thornton's solutions can help you

Our approach in supporting you to assess, protect and restore value in your business starts with helping you to regain control by stabilizing the business, while developing a robust and realistic turnaround plan. We draw upon our deep expertise across a range of different areas, customized to your specific needs.

Successful turnarounds require the development of a credible plan that has been stress tested against various scenarios, along with a transparent communication strategy that meets the needs of all stakeholders. Building trust, and not breaking promises, will be critical if the plan is to be realized.



### Stabilization, turnaround, and business plan assessment

In the early stages of a turnaround the right support is necessary to create financial stability, assess cash flow and identify opportunities to improve short-term liquidity.

Through independent diagnostic analysis and challenge, we provide stakeholders with a clear understanding of the options available, including strategic and tactical opportunities.

This crucial activity provides comfort and support to management teams and can realize the credibility of the plan as part of the assessment process of financial stakeholders.

# Our solutions



## Operational and financial restructuring

Our multi-disciplinary operational and financial restructuring specialists provide support to realize significant business process improvement, implement new business strategies, divest noncore businesses and design new capital structures aligned to the dynamics of the business. Our team also has significant experience in supporting renegotiations of lease/rent terms and in helping businesses access government support which may be available.



## Real estate advisory

Our real estate advisory team can help you create a flexible real estate strategy and plan, allowing your business to adapt when it needs to. With the foundation, strategy and plan in place, we will help you optimize your business' efficiency and productivity. Capital raised as a result and in addition to strategic disposals can be re-invested elsewhere and support your business growth, find the right space, in the right location provides a foundation to promote success through your business' operations, people, technology and access to market, enabling you to focus on your business goals.



## Debt advisory

We provide specialist advice on the raising and refinancing of debt. Through our deep understanding of the funding landscape and detailed knowledge of the credit process, we devise tailored funding solutions as part of a sustainable capital structure in line with the strategic ambition of our clients.



## Exit strategy services

We apply a tailored methodology and fully project-manage and implement the sale or closure of underperforming or non-core corporate entities at maximum value.



## Valuations to support asset-backed lending decisions, restructuring and transactions

We provide valuations to support asset-backed financing, including valuing shares and intangible assets, and provide periodic valuations of assets to confirm that the terms of the loan agreement continue to be met. For mergers, acquisitions, restructuring and proposed financial structures, we provide an independent view on value delivering robust advice within the constraints placed by the deal deadlines.



## Accelerated M&A

We provide advice and manage transactions associated with the acquisition or disposal of distressed assets or businesses, frequently to short timescales.



## Asset recovery and tracing

Asset recovery and tracing normally form part of formal insolvency processes such as liquidations, or are carried out in support of ongoing litigation or fraud investigations. We use specialized approaches to identify and recover misappropriated assets, including those held in offshore trusts, to provide cost-effective value recovery.



## Corporate insolvency

Where a business cannot be saved or where a formal insolvency process is required to affect a restructuring, we provide advice and support to distressed companies, their creditors and other stakeholders in order to protect assets and maximize recoveries. In some situations, we take on the role of Chief Restructuring Officer. Our experience extends to protecting the company from creditor action while a financial restructuring is put in place.



## Pension schemes solvency

In many parts of the world, we offer a specialist capability to advise corporates and trustees on the solvency of pension schemes.



## Enterprise risk management

Our enterprise risk management (ERM) specialists help organizations implement the leading approach to managing and optimizing risk. We are able to tailor the approach to our client's individual challenge and create bespoke strategies that work, enabling them to strategically identify, analyze and monitor potential risk to their organization.



## Cybersecurity

Our cybersecurity solutions are designed for clients seeking to address a variety of complex security requirements. We can help organizations assess their security vulnerability, establish or improve their IT security processes and remediate breaches or compliance failures.



## Business Process Outsourcing and Shared Service Centers

Increasingly, large organizations are looking to fully outsource their transactional end-to-end finance and accounting processes, leaving them free to focus their finance resources on important strategic business value. We typically commit to reduce costs and/or improve productivity and quality. We also advise organizations on optimizing finance and accounting processes, and can take our recommendations through to implementation, whether this involves building a full-scale Business Process Outsourced delivery capability or setting up a Shared Services Center.



## Back office outsourcing

We provide outsourced accounting, payroll, human resource and tax services to domestic SMEs or local branches of international organizations. Our services are managed centrally to deliver a consistent experience for each of our clients, however widespread their operations. We exploit innovative digital technology to give our clients access to their data round the clock; the same technology gives our large corporate clients access to new and cost-effective offshore platforms. Where our clients face complex tax and payroll challenges, our tax, global mobility and wealth management specialists provide expert, value-adding advice.



## Global compliance partnering

Our global compliance partnering solution delivers all local statutory financial reporting, centralized statutory audits, tax compliance (corporate, sales and payroll), payroll administration and local country filings for multinational organizations through a single point of contact. We are the leading adviser to dynamic organizations delivering a solution that improves reporting efficiency and enhances risk management. By providing full transparency, real-time monitoring and highlighting upcoming deadlines, we enable local and central management teams to ensure full compliance at all times.



## Financial reporting advisory

We provide clear and practical solutions to address complex accounting and financial reporting issues. We support businesses in navigating the accounting and reporting of government stimulus packages. We're also able to help navigate the accounting and reporting of complex areas including leases, impairment and going concern.



## Restructuring tax

Our restructuring tax teams specialize in providing tax advice in all aspects of restructuring scenarios. In particular, this includes advising on the tax aspects of:

- independent business reviews, options reviews and contingency planning
- business restructuring, eg debt restructuring
- mergers and acquisitions
- disposals of trade and assets or wind down of businesses
- corporate insolvencies
- fraud investigations.



# Credentials



## Multi-lender restructuring

**Client Business description:** Leading tourism and leisure group involved in all aspects of tourism including, hotel management and IATA agencies.

**Engagement description:** Grant Thornton was appointed to act as lead financial advisors in relation to the debt restructuring of the Group.

**Challenge:** The lenders involved in the restructuring held exposures of approximately US\$336 million by way of a significant number of bilateral loans. There were a number of complicating factors that existed at the date of Grant Thornton's appointment or arose during discussions, including: complex and varying debt pricing, security and guarantee arrangements; a lack of agreed inter-creditor and enforcement arrangements; and unstable market conditions.

**Solution:** An international team was formed by Grant Thornton, comprising our restructuring and industry experts based across Europe to support negotiations and provide local expertise on key matters. Grant Thornton project managed the entire process, with our involvement including the following key work streams:

- Creation of a detailed entity priority model which enabled the lenders to understand fully the waterfall for the application of funds on insolvency, and assess their relative security positions

- An insightful review of the business plan in order to assess its robustness, and key areas of opportunity and risk within Management's forecasts. This included an assessment of debt capacity to help inform the detailed debt restructuring negotiations
- A review of the Group's various tax structuring proposals was undertaken for the benefit of the lenders

**Outcome:** Following Grant Thornton's establishment of a restructuring proposal, provision of highly detailed debt restructuring advice and engagement in complex negotiations with the lenders, a consensual restructuring was secured and thousands of jobs preserved. Additionally, all of the significant lenders entered into a modernized restructuring agreement based on Loan Market Association principles and appropriate financial and non-financial covenants for the agreed facility were put in place.

Through this process, lenders were provided with a realistic prospect of achieving a full recovery of their significant exposures and trust and integrity was also restored in the lending environment.



## Shared Services Center

**Client Business description:** Largest hospitality company in Europe and sixth largest in the world, headquartered in France.

**Engagement description:** Provision of accounting and analytical reports for 150 hotels from one delivery center managed by Grant Thornton.

**Challenge:** Centralizing all the accounting activities to provide reliable and consistent analytical reports to the hotels managers and to assist them in the monitoring of their hotels' businesses. Operating at scale to provide substantial savings to the operator. Reducing the deadlines in accordance with the client's Fast Close process.

**Solution:** Grant Thornton built up a delivery center with a dedicated team for the whole portfolio of hotels. We provided highly trained people to ensure high expertise and the ability to deliver in short deadlines. We implemented our excellence process framework methodology to deliver the relevant level of quality.

**Outcome:** Grant Thornton increased the productivity of the team by 25% when centralizing all the operations in our delivery center and delivered the monthly analytical reports within two and a half open days in accordance with our client's request. We also implemented accurate KPIs to monitor monthly the quality of the delivery.



## Financial restructuring and asset preservation executed through insolvency process

**Client Business description:** Large branded hotel chain, headquartered in the UK.

**Engagement description:** The growth and ambition of a branded national hotel chain was constrained by a debt structure it was unable to service following a prolonged economic downturn.

**Challenge:** The business was highly leveraged and had a significant pension fund deficit. These obligations made access to additional funds, that were needed to continue to trade, extremely challenging. Options that the management team had explored with its lenders to restructure its debts and secure additional finance had not led to an agreed way forward.

**Solution:** Grant Thornton initially supported stakeholders in gathering and validating key information which was required for negotiations between lenders, landlords, pension fund trustees and regulators. Grant Thornton were also asked to produce a restructuring plan and provide options which were stress tested against various scenarios.

As part of this restructuring process, Grant Thornton supported management with complex negotiations with landlords which resulted in the consensual handing back of several loss-making leased hotels which did not fit with the core strategy. The restructuring plan also included supporting the management team preparing the business for sale should other options be exhausted.

As it was not possible to align the interests of a diverse body of stakeholders, including the pensions regulator, the business sale option was chosen. In implementing the sale plan, Grant Thornton deployed highly technical skills in pensions advisory, program management and negotiation to execute the transfer of the business through an insolvency process. This all at a time where the group was under severe cash flow pressures and at considerable risk of losing significant value.

**Outcome:** Grant Thornton attracted new capital and secured an on-going business. Value in excess of US\$130 million was preserved for the key stakeholders.



## Businesses turnaround

**Client Business description:** Boutique West End hotel in London.

**Engagement description:** Appointed Receiver by debenture holder to effect a turnaround and sale.

**Challenge:** This well-known hotel had been partially redeveloped and was partially open however, they had run out of money to complete the redevelopment and the debenture holder had run out of patience. The plan was to complete the refurbishment of the hotel to an agreed budget so that it was a fully functioning hotel and trading profitability in order to maximize the sale value. The debenture holder was owed US\$26m and the hotel was valued at US\$19m-US\$26m, so there was likely to be a shortfall on sale if the hotel's value could not be maximized.

**Solution:** Grant Thornton structured a business plan that was agreed by all the stakeholders and the debenture holder was prepared to contribute to the finance to complete the refurbishment and reopen the hotel. The debenture holder was initially looking at writing off some of the debt, however the business plan demonstrated that with the right investment and the right management team, the debenture holder would recover all their investments. The redevelopment was completed and the hotel was fully opened and trading profitability for 18 months.

**Outcome:** The hotel was put on the market and sold for US\$39m within six months. The debenture holder was repaid in full and the shareholders received a return.



## Outsourcing and compliance services

**Client Business description:** French hotelier which owns, operates and manages 85 hotels in eight countries across Europe (mainly in the midscale segment).

**Engagement description:** A large hospitality company sold a portfolio of hotels to a new franchisee hotel operator which was mainly owned by a respected European investment fund. Grant Thornton provided outsourcing services to perform bookkeeping, financial statements, tax declaration and corporate secretarial services for 61 French hotels and 24 hotels elsewhere in Europe including Austria, Belgium, Germany, Italy, Portugal, the Netherlands and Spain.

**Challenge:** Being the business partner of the client to assist the hotel managers in the monitoring of their businesses on a day-to-day basis and the corporate finance department in the analysis of consolidated data. Implementing a digital solution to improve the efficiency of the Procure-to-Pay process for the whole portfolio. Dealing with local compliance requirements in every European country in which the client has hotels.

**Solution:** Grant Thornton built up a delivery center with a dedicated team for the whole portfolio of hotels. We provided highly trained people by processes to ensure high expertise and the ability to deliver against short deadlines. Grant Thornton implemented our excellence process framework methodology to deliver the relevant level of quality. We set up a coordination team to ensure a smooth collaboration between all involved parties: local Grant Thornton teams in each country, centralized Grant Thornton team in France, corporate head office of the client. We onboarded our consulting team to implement a complete digital solution for the PtoP activities and RPA for transactional activities.

**Outcome:** We implemented of a full IT solution covering all the scope of the outsourced activities within six months. We built a strong governance model with all countries involved in our monthly European steering committee. 100% of suppliers' invoices and approval workflows were digitalized. We delivered 100% of the analytical reports within four open days using the same group chart of accounts and accounting principles.



## Asset realization through insolvency

**Client Business description:** BVI based hotel investment fund investing in the development of hotels, villas and condotels in Vietnam.

**Engagement description:** The operating business in Vietnam defaulted on loans made by a BVI registered holdco. Grant Thornton were appointed as Receivers to the BVI holdco. This process allowed Grant Thornton to design and implement a restructuring plan which included the realization of value through the disposal of the overseas investment properties.

**Challenge:** As Vietnam does not recognize the jurisdiction of foreign courts, Grant Thornton had to overcome the challenge of taking control of the ownership of overseas assets through negotiation and the use of international restructuring skills.

**Solution:** Grant Thornton BVI successfully persuaded existing Vietnamese management to resign their positions and appointed local Grant Thornton restructuring professionals to take full management control of the business. Grant Thornton were then able to market and sell the business in an orderly way, protecting value and employment while maximizing realizations from the asset base.

**Outcome:** All of the outstanding debt was repaid to the BVI investment fund, with the underlying business put under new ownership with a sustainable future.



## Risk and Internal Audit services

**Client Business description:** Publicly traded hotel ownership company.

**Engagement description:** Grant Thornton provides risk compliance and internal audit services to a large publicly traded lodging company. The relationship we have is rooted in our expertise in the hospitality and lodging industry. Grant Thornton provides consulting on internal control matters at the ownership, operator, and property levels, and our approach is designed to add value to the organization beyond compliance.

**Challenge:** With regulatory compliance requirements increasing in a heavily scrutinized environment, our client needed solutions identifying that promoted compliance without sacrificing operational efficiency.

**Solution:** Grant Thornton's approach was customized to the needs of the client. We focused our program on a core set of financial and operational risks identified in the industry. Our team of trained hospitality professionals effectively addressed these risks through customized audit programs and specifically designed control testing. In doing this, Grant Thornton:

- Demonstrated a minimal learning curve on the client assignments, the result of working with a wide range of hospitality companies and bringing strong overall industry context to our work
- Provided a multifunctional team focused on the hospitality and lodging industry backed by a network of national and international SMEs in all major disciplines

### Outcome:

- Helped our client achieve cost savings while minimizing the impact on process-owner time
- Delivered a deep understanding of the rapidly changing regulatory requirements and new industry developments, along with value added ideas to support our client's needs as a growth-oriented business
- Provided value through our track record of delivering work that can be relied upon as a part of an integrated financial statement audit
- Our deliverables achieved more than just testing results, they provided value add recommendations for running a best in class control environment.



# Helping your business respond to COVID-19

We are immersed in the hotel industry and our professionals are uniquely positioned to assist you in all aspects of the creation and execution of your turnaround plan.

- 1 You will be working with people who are part of your industry, have a track record of achieving success for their clients, and we will bring that experience to your challenges
- 2 We will take a holistic view of the challenges you face and deliver targeted solutions throughout the various elements of hotel operations, ownership and funding
- 3 We will work closely with you to implement performance and working capital improvements and drive effective restructuring strategies. These include providing independent critique of refinancing proposals and acting as a respected bridge between lenders and the senior management team
- 4 Our experience of effective divestment/investment strategies will help you identify and maximize opportunities for value creation or protection and to improve liquidity availability if necessary
- 5 Regardless of the complexity of your group structures, or the international footprint, we have a global network of firms and market-leading teams in all the key offshore financial centers, to be able to advise on all leading practices
- 6 We are at the heart of the development of cross-border restructuring legislation, giving our clients access to leading-edge and best practice restructuring solutions

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