

Technology is reshaping hospitality industry, and education

Hospitality students need to understand how technology is changing both the expectations of patrons as well as the way in which the hospitality industry conducts its business

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WITH ONLINE TRAVEL agents and the home-sharing economy such as Airbnb dominating the industry, hotels are finding they have to reinvent themselves to be relevant to new market demands. For many years, we were happy with the norm, knowing guests would come. However, guests are becoming "experience seekers," actively looking for

something new and different. Top that with the instant gratification of information through social media and advice from friends in real-time, the industry is currently undergoing a huge transformation.

From the top down, we are seeing many innovative concepts. From the trailblazers of CitizenM to the newly-opened Zoku (in Amsterdam) which uses space to a maximum and places emphasis on social spaces, this new breed of "hybrid" hotels combines traditional stay with long stay. The Student Hotel in Amsterdam is another great example of this. Yes, it targets students' long stay for their studies, but will also take someone for one night, for either business or leisure, and actively encourages interaction between students and other guests. As an educator, I find this particular example very interesting as it facilitates an environment where experienced professionals can speak with students, offer help, mentorship and life experiences. Again, the social space is key to this.

In the past, hotel reception areas were, quite frankly, depressing spaces. Now they are cool, vibrant, trendy and a great place for local people to come—and for the hotel, they are driving additional revenue. Even a traditional hotel company such as the Hilton is joining the game with Canopy by Hilton. Again, the social space is placed at the forefront. Of course, this is on purpose targeting the ever-affluent and growing "millennial" market. These guests are into socialising, cool foods and beverages, and in search of something new. All of these concepts are moving away from traditional hotels, which, for me, is a breath of fresh air. Hotels previously relied on star ratings, dictated by room size, turn-down service, minibar and movies—all of which the guest of today no longer wants or needs. In an ideal world, if it were up to me, I would remove the star rating system. It has been a major barrier to innovation in our industry, linked with poor investment and complex ownership models. And behind all

of this innovation is, of course, technology.

As an industry, we have never been very good at the overall technology thing. Even Wi-Fi for guests proves to be a battle, as the industry struggles to comprehend if it should be free or payable. Technology is now the business enabler that will drive not just innovation but new processes and experiences as well. Technology in the future will remove the reception. The guests' check-in experience will be 100% on their mobile phones, allowing them to go straight to their

The Student Hotel in Amsterdam is a great example of a "hybrid" hotel. It targets students' long stay for their studies, but will also take someone for one night, for either business or leisure, and actively encourages interaction between students and other guests

rooms. Guest interaction with the hotel will also be done through mobiles. An American company called Alice allows guests to "text" requests to the hotel in real-time. Many, however, might say that using technology in such a way goes against what hospitality is about—"the people." On the contrary, I would say this frees up staff from manual, paper-based processes to have more time to interact with guests and provide better services. Early adopters who get this will have great success. The airline industry has been doing this for years, and no one has complained. Imagine if we went back to how it was previously, where you could not check yourself in on your phone or download your boarding pass, but had to go to the airport three hours before and stand in a long queue!

Technology in the guest room will also change; this is down to how consumers use it. An example is in-room entertainment. In the future, it may completely disappear. Why, because more and more people are moving

to Netflix and similar platforms. It is predicted that, by 2020, there will be 2 million Netflix subscribers in India, and 8 million by 2025, and that is just one platform. The hotel room of the future will allow the guest to connect their device to the television and watch content wirelessly. This may actually be better for the hotel as it will reduce investment in entertainment systems; it does, however, mean better and faster Wi-Fi will be required. Looking even further, there will be more room automation so the IoT (Internet of Things) will move into the hotel room. This will only take place during a new building or renovation cycle, but will allow for a more streamlined guest experience. This will also include voice-activated rooms. But all of this I will save for a later article.

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