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The Uncertainty New Normal



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How New Tech is Immunizing Hotel Operations Against the Uncertainty of Staffing Shortages

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Synopsis

In this article, ASSA ABLOY's Li Wang discusses the challenge of retaining staff in the hospitality industry due to high turnover rates, made worse by the pandemic and changing employee expectations. The solution proposed is to use cloud-based technology to streamline operations and prevent burnout, allowing staff to focus on improving guest experience. Location-based technology is also noted as a way to improve efficiency and employee wellbeing by allowing real-time tracking of hotel assets, monitoring motorized equipment, and reducing workloads.

Ask virtually any hotelier what the industry's hardest challenge currently is. More likely than not, the issue keeping many property managers up at night is simply keeping on enough staff to run their various departments and services. While the hospitality industry is certainly no stranger to high turnover rates, the pandemic and evolving employee expectations has only made a bad situation much worse and practically unworkable.

Kneejerk responses such as raising hourly wages have proven to have limited if any effect, so hoteliers continue to be hard-pressed on finding a solution that can finally reverse this worrying trend. However, and much like a growing number of things within hospitality, advances in technology are shedding light on not only what has been responsible for pushing workers away from the industry, but also importantly what can be done to attract them back and finally win their loyalty.

LOOKING FOR ANSWERS IN THE CLOUD

Many frontline hospitality work roles unfortunately have a reputation for being high stress and fast-paced which can easily translate into employee burnout and job dissatisfaction if left unchanged. Since the onset of the worker shortage, the lack of available employees has only made the situation worse as remaining workers have to pick up the slack and take on more responsibilities than ever before.

To prevent burnout from resulting in a vicious cycle where more overworked staff begin eyeing the exits, hoteliers can best serve the interests of both their employees and business by looking toward the many advantages that cloud-based technologies offer in streamlining operations. For example, and unlike legacy solutions requiring a costly onsite server, cloud-supported platforms sidestep the need for workers to remain stationary at a fixed terminal in order to monitor, manage and otherwise interact with a solution's user-interface. For employees up to their necks in tasks but yet all of a sudden required to access a system's dashboard which may be located on the opposite end of a property, access to a cloud-based system via personal device can mean all the difference in completing responsibilities in a timely fashion without adding any unnecessary stress.

With a cloud-based access management system, for instance, hotel employees can finally free themselves from the front desk in order to pick up any slack in other operational areas without compromising property security, guest convenience or their own mental health. Using a secure connection to their personal device, staff members can stay in the loop on any guest stay extension or room reassignment requests, as well as any potential security issues requiring immediate attention.

Allowing hotel staff to win back even more precious time is the ability for a cloud-based solution to receive maintenance and any software updates remotely and without the need for onsite employee assistance. This advantage means that any disruption to operations is always minimal, while hoteliers can ensure that their services are consistently backed by the latest features and functionalities. For a hotel's employee teams, offloading routine system tasks importantly means being able to double-down on providing attention to service areas that actually influence the guest experience- reducing the possibility of burnout with its risks of high turnover while elevating service quality standards and improving business bottom lines as a result.

SUPPORTING YOUR EMPLOYEES WITH THE POWER OF LOCATION

Over the last few years, hotel businesses have become more acquainted with location-based technologies as an effective means of ensuring employee safety and as the industry continues to place a priority on the issue. With both regional and municipal mandates continuing to be passed requiring adequate protection measures for hotel employees, it is now common to see operations supported by alert devices allowing staff to transmit their real-time location in the event of a threat to their safety.

However, while staff safety solutions have taken up much of the spotlight when it comes to location-based technologies for hotels, a less well known fact is that more advanced systems are designed to be scalable and can adopt a range of additional functionalities that are beneficial in terms of both improved operational efficiency and employee wellbeing.

Location-based technologies can also be used to monitor the real-time location of hotel assets. From housekeeping supplies and maintenance equipment to amenity rentals and F&B inventory, the simple attaching of a reader tag can instantly translate into countless hours saved which otherwise would be lost to needlessly searching for items. This again leads to employees being able to re-focus their efforts on other important matters and gives them the time needed to not just complete tasks, but to do so with attention to detail in order to consistently ensure high quality service. At the same time, location-based asset tracking technology also results in guests having to wait less for their requests to be carried out, boosting satisfaction rates and the potential for hotel businesses to earn more revenue without coming at the cost of jeopardizing employee mental health.

Location-based technology's time savings and efficiency-improving capabilities also extend to monitoring and managing the performance of motorized equipment. Whether servicing a hotel's refrigerators, HVAC systems or elevators (to name a few examples), routine maintenance check-ups are a necessary aspect of running any successful hotel, but that doesn't mean that such tasks don't take up more than a fair share of employee time. Lessening workloads while providing much improved responsiveness, a location-based system is able to maintain 24/7 surveillance on equipment health and can instantly notify staff of any performance issues requiring immediate attention.

Such systems can also alert employees to any routine maintenance tasks requiring completion, saving them from time-consuming guesswork while protecting hotel businesses from overlooking any repairs that could translate into a costly expense if left alone for too long.

SELF-SERVICE TECHNOLOGY: GIVING HOTEL STAFF A BREAK & GUESTS AN OPPORTUNITY FOR ENHANCED CONVENIENCE

The hotel industry experienced a surge in adoption rates for contactless/self-service solutions during the height of the pandemic, but thanks to their added benefit of improving service response times, have continued to increase in popularity. Arguably leading this trend and one of the most sought after by guests are digital key and check-in services.

But while these solutions are predominately adopted due to their advantages in boosting guest satisfaction and convenience, technologies such as digital key can also provide overstretched staff with some much needed breathing room. Just by allowing each guest to check-in using personal devices, hoteliers can slash the number of guests waiting in line at the front desk which can easily consume an employee's day with little time left for anything else. Routine processes that add little towards enhancing guest experiences, such as generating and issuing room keys, can now be done automatically and instantly. This once again provides hotel employees with more time to focus on more pressing matters that actually do stand to influence guest stay experiences.

UTILIZING TECHNOLOGY TO IMPROVE BOTH THE GUEST AND EMPLOYEE EXPERIENCE

Much of the hotel industry's focus has understandably been on finding ways to improve the guest experience, but without giving much thought to the employee experience, hoteliers risk underperforming in both areas. What inevitably results as can be seen by current market conditions is a flight of staff members seeking improved work conditions, ultimately resulting in smaller hotel teams who are often unable to keep pace with increasing guest standards.

However, and by leveraging the technology advances now available to the industry, hoteliers can finally begin to tackle the core issues that have been responsible for historically high turnover rates. Using these newer solutions, they can put unpredictable fluctuations in workforce availability to rest and critically, can begin to build a workplace environment that breeds loyalty and a commitment to making guest experiences that much more exceptional.



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Li Wang serves as Vice President and Head of Hospitality for ASSA ABLOY Global Solutions. He is tasked with working together with the Hospitality team to further develop market-leading solutions and services to serve the needs of hotel operators. Prior to his current role, Li served as Managing Director of Biosite Systems LTD, a company he founded a decade ago to provide biometric workforce management solutions for the construction industry. Under his leadership, the company has quickly grown into a market leader in the UK and has since been acquired by ASSA ABLOY in 2020. Li holds an MBA and a PhD in computer Science from the University of Warwick.

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