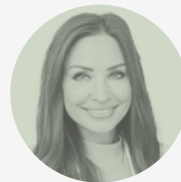
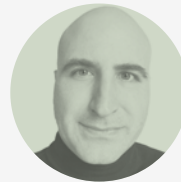


HYB25

Sustainability Tech Edition

Unlocking Smart & Sustainable Tech
Solutions for Hospitality



The Hotel Yearbook

Foresight and innovation in the global hotel industry

HYB



The Hospitality Paradox: Embracing Automation While Protecting Jobs

Automation & Jobs

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For years now, the most pressing issue in hospitality has been employment shortages, and housekeeping gets stated as being most critically understaffed. Research has also been published about the low job satisfaction experienced with hospitality employees in general, and housekeepers specifically.

Simultaneously, AI and digitization has seen a massive burst in recent years, and the WEF even predict that by 2030, the majority of repetitive tasks will have been taken over by some sort of automation. Views like this have been emerging as early as 2019, when it was already speculated that robots could be deployed to take over heavy, repetitive tasks in hospitality. However, what is viewed as simple and repetitive for humans might be very complex and diverse for a robot. The most recent developments in automation rely heavily on software and AI, but the tasks this entails are not essential to hospitality operations. In the 5 years that robots have become more popular, hospitality hasn't changed as drastically as expected, and the employment problems persisted. The promised change might therefore be coming more slowly than expected.

Adopting a pro-automation view has been dubbed as technochauvinism, meaning that it holds the belief that technology can do any task better than human employees, and because of that will inevitably take over these tasks one day. While it is important to keep our eye on developing technology because it has done amazing things in the past, when a technochauvinistic view is adopted, it might lead to the disregard of human employees and their issues. If we start viewing cooks, cleaners, and housekeepers as people whose jobs will probably be replaced in the near future, it will undoubtedly have negative effects on relationships between employees and decision makers.

CHALLENGES IN AUTOMATING HOSPITALITY TASKS

It is currently still unclear for many tasks how easy it would be for machines to take over. The automation case in hospitality is different from the one in factories. In manufacturing, an assembly process gets broken up and each operation gets executed by a dedicated robot. A job like housekeeping, the most critically understaffed department in hospitality, consists of many small physical tasks with great variety. A room cleaning operation as short as 20 minutes consists of up to 10 tasks like vacuuming, general tidying up, restocking items, wiping curved surfaces, changing bed linen etc. Automating this would require a very complex robot that currently does not exist. The analogy with factory environments also breaks here because this would require a different robot for each task and therefore up to 10 robots for each housekeeper that gets replaced. Also, to move in and out of every room, the robots would need to be mobile on top of its complex functions, something that factory robots seldomly are.

For cooking, this reasoning also holds true, and robot applications have been developed that demonstrate this pulling apart of the process to produce food automatically and at comparable speeds to human cooks. However, the resulting machines are big, take a large initial investment and are often only capable of cooking one specific dish, making them very suitable in fast food contexts, but difficult to use in more high end kitchens, where different items are on the menu and menus change frequently.

SUSTAINABLE EMPLOYMENT

When we imagine a hotel stay, we think about the quality of the room we were assigned, the employees we interacted with and the quality of the food we eat. Most of the tasks that deliver any hotel service, still require many actions executed by human employees. Because of this, it is important to also look at hotels as employers responsible for the wellbeing of the employees delivering their product.

Unfortunately, the hotel industry has started to outsource various operations, a process sometimes referred to as fissuring. When this happens, many employment issues don't fall under the responsibility of the hospitality companies anymore. They don't need to consider themselves with hiring practices and simply buy the services required from third parties. However, this fissuring also leads to increased competition among subcontractors, which often affects workers negatively. At the same time, the hospitality companies don't have the direct power to influence compensation for the people executing their tasks. This outsourcing process therefore might come back to bite the industry.

The issue of sustainable employment is not on the top of hospitality's agenda, and in discussions about increasing environmental sustainability and digitization, it is sometimes disregarded. An illustrative example of this is the "*Do not clean my room*" policy that has become popular across the industry, where hotel guests that stay in a room for more than one night can choose whether they want their room cleaned every day. This practice clearly saves unnecessary cleaning resources, making it environmentally more sustainable than cleaning every room daily by default. However, it does introduce an element of uncertainty into housekeeping operations, because whether the room should be cleaned only becomes clear on the day of the cleaning. If there then are too few or too many housekeepers, the amount of time per room will decrease or the housekeepers will finish early and get compensated less. We are not advocating for taking away these waste saving programs, but the uncertainty that they introduce should not fall on the shoulders of operational workers.

WHAT CAN AUTOMATION DO TO INCREASE SUSTAINABLE EMPLOYMENT

The hotel industry therefore continues to suffer from staffing issues while the technology to take over operations isn't ready yet. At Hotelschool The Hague, we are currently researching hospitality technology in a different way. We start by looking at which parts of employees' jobs are most uncomfortable and look for technological solutions to battle these issues. We hope that this way of innovating will eventually improve job quality.

An exciting start has already been made with the DuvetLifter, a simple tool to battle shoulder pain experienced by housekeepers when replacing duvet covers. During first field tests, the tool showed that it was able to reduce pain, even though it is not a perfect product yet. Taking away occupational pain might reduce the number of employees calling in sick and reduce turnover, thereby battling the employee shortages experienced in hospitality directly.



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