USING THE PREREGISTRATION PROCEDURES TO MINIMIZE THE CHECK-IN DURATION AND TO REFLECT AN EXCELLENT GUEST EXPERIENCE FOR REGULARS AND REPEATERS

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ABSTRACT

The first impression a guest receives of a lodging facility during registration is extremely important in setting the quality for hospitality and establishing a continuing business relationship. Today's guest expects to be treated with respect and concern, and many hotels make the effort to meet those expectations. Those who do not, should not expect the guest to return. Guest registration is nothing but recording the guest's information for official purposes. At the time of reservation, the front office staff asks the guests to enter their personal information on the GRC. Registration activity is mandatory for both the guest with reserved accommodation as well as for the walk-in guest.

Guest registration modules have greatly improved the check-in process. Because information has already been captured at the time of reservation, less time is required for registration. The front desk clerk needs only to confirm the guest's pre-information and finally the guest request for the room type, location and rate with room inventory and room status. Method of payment is also established. The hard plastic key can be issued after the security module has changed the entrance code for the room. The guest registration procedure can also be completed by the self-check-in process, a procedure that requires the guest to insert a credit card having a magnetic stripe containing personal and financial data into a self-check-in terminal and answer a few simple questions concerning the guest stay. Also note the inclusion of the intranet in this module which greatly supports the communication process required by the front office staff in delivering hospitality at the time of check-in. The front desk clerk chooses the room the guest will occupy and issues a key. The total time required for registration is less than five minutes. This study examine show preregistration procedures which can minimize the check-in duration and reflect an excellent guest experience especially for regulars and repeaters guests.

The data were collected via a semi-structured questionnaire addressed to rooms division and front office managers in five-star Hotels in Hurghada - Red Sea, Egypt.

The research focused on a five star hotels who don't adopt a developed GRC in order to minimize check-in duration and how it can reflect negatively on regulars and repeaters experience.

Keywords: Front Office Operation, GRC, Check in Duration, Chain Hotels, Local Chain Hotels, Reservation, PMS, Guest History

INTRODUCTION

Figuring out the right mix of human-delivered and automated customer service which has become crucial for all industries, especially with the arrival in the marketplace of the famously tech-savvy millennial generation of customers. Millennials, of course, have a very strong inclination towards automated and self-service customer service, having grown up in a world where phones have always been smart and the internet has always been on. The delivery of businesses today is exposed to information and communication technologies either directly or indirectly (Sriyam 2010; Kokkinou & Cranage 2013).

Hotels were traditionally practicing manual system of operation in their front offices as from the occupancy of the guest rooms, recording of guest expenditure through to the eventual departure of the guest. Today, these operations are done using the electronic system. The use of information technology in a front office operation of the hospitality industry is fast growing, thus making work easy. Computerization is becoming very important for the efficient and effective operations of the front office (Hwang & Lambert 2008; Kontoh *et al.*, 2012; Kokkinou & Cranage 2013).

LITERATURE REVIEW

The front office department is the most noticeable department in the hotel. It is traditionally known as reception and it is the focal point of most activities within a hospitality business, whether it is a large or small hotel, a cruise liner, a holiday center, a time-share

resort or a youth hostel. The front office is the first and last place where a guest has direct contact with the business and is the most visible of all departments within the hospitality industry. The front office is a term accepted as including back of house responsibilities, such as switchboard, accounts, cashier and night audit, front desk, concierge and guest services (Edexcel, 2010). The department may have the front desk, reservations, telephony and the concierge, which provide the guests with services and facilities. The main function of the front office department is to support and smooth the progress of guest transaction and services through all the four stages in the guest cycle; that is, pre-arrival, arrival, occupancy and departure. The front office department does all the guest transactions such as reservations, check-in and registration, mail and information, uniformed service and baggage handling, telephone calls and messages, guest accounts, check-out and bill settlement (Baker *et al.*, 2006; Bardi 2007; Edexcel 2006).

When customers contact the front office with specific details of their proposed reservation, the Central Reservation Officer (CRO) checks room's availability and makes reservation directly into the system (Baker *et al.*, 2006). Making reservation now is easier for guests with the help of computers and Internet because guests do not have to be on site before booking for a room.

Computers are widely used in front office today because of its efficiency and effectiveness in clerical, repetitive, data manipulation, number calculating, speed and accuracy. The involvement of IT does not work only in the front office but links all the departments like housekeeping, food and beverage, conference and health or leisure clubs together. The CRS connect hotels in a chain by sharing information such as available rooms, room rates and so on. Using CRS utilizes yield management to allow better and smoother control of room inventory, provide hotels with a wealth of information that could increase occupancy and revenue (Knowles, 1998). Central Reservation Officers only have the ability to know the availability of rooms at a particular time of another hotel within the same chain (Baker *et al.*, 2006; Edexcel, 2010).

Computer applications are being integrated into everyday operations to assist in providing hospitality to guests. It includes routinely processing reservations as well as handling registrations, guest charges, guest checkout, and the night audit and interfacing, the electronic sharing of data of hotel departments such as food and beverage and the gift shop through point-of-

sale (Ritchi 2003; Bardi 2007; Olifer & Olifer 2006).

The system must meet the needs of the staff as well as the guests. An inappropriate PMS will produce control reports that are not useful to management, the functions of such software therefore are limited, and the cost of the system exceeds its value. Selecting software, the computer programs or applications that process data such as guest information and aid in financial transactions and report generation, is highly important. The effectiveness of a PMS depends on selecting software that allows management to increase guest satisfaction and to access financial and informational data for control purposes. The information obtained from the needs analysis provides a framework for evaluating the numerous software packages on the market today. Each software package offers numerous features; it is important to choose one package that is most appropriate for staff needs (Bardi 2007; Kontoh *et al.*, 2012).

The guest chooses a hotel during the pre-arrival stage of the guest cycle. Choice of the guest can be affected by many factors, including previous experiences with the hotel, advertisement, word of mouth referral by friends and colleagues, location, corporate, hotel name, hotel loyalty program member and so on. The guest's decision of making the reservation can also be effected by the ease of making the reservation and the way reservation agent interacted and described the facility of the hotel like room type, room rate, recreational facilities, other attractions near the hotels and many other information (Olifer & Olifer 2006; Bardi 2007; Hwang & Lambert 2008; Bonacorsi 2011).

Customers could check on marketing information, room availability and room rates with the use of the internet. The reservation clerk constantly updates information on the internet to reflect the current activities of the hotels. Through IT, automatic check-in is available to guests at the front office. Guests need credit cards to be issued with a computer-coded room key (Abbott & Lewry, 1999). The credit cards are needed to activate these machines to issue the computer-coded room key. The machine displays a menu showing the available rooms and their rate for guests to make their reservations and booking (Edexcel, 2010).

If a reservation can be accepted, the reservation agent creates a reservation on the hotel management software. The creation of this reservation record starts the hotel guest cycle. This reservation contains details of guest specific request which will help the hotel to provide the guest with personalized service during his stay. The details which are collected during the reservation also help the hotel to complete pre-

registration activities like assign room according to guest request, room rate to be charged to the guest folio during the course of stay, however the primary objective of making the reservation is to make sure that room will be available when guest arrives to the hotel (Ritchie 2003; Bardi 2007; Hwang & Lambert 2008).

The arrival stage of the guest cycle includes registration and room assignment process. After the guest arrives, he or she establishes a business relationship with the hotel through front office. It is the front office staff responsibility to clarify any query of the guest especially the details of room rate of packages he /she is booked on. Front office staff should determine the guest's reservation status before beginning the check-in / registration process. Guest with reservation and guest without reservation commonly known as Walk-in's also provide an opportunity of business for front desk staff (Ritchie 2003; Sriyam 2010).

A registration card is printed and completed at the time of check in, which will help the front desk to collect essential information. The registration card should contain details like billing instructions, reservation details, number of adults and children occupying, address, passport and visa for foreign nationals, full address, personal details and credit card details. Because the guest and hotel gains certain legal benefits it is mandatory to get guest signature on the registration card. Once the registration process completes the method of payment, the guest's departure date have been confirmed and duly signed by the guest. The guest may be given a room key and direction to the room or escorted by the guest service associate or guest service manager (Baker *et al.*, 2006; Olifer & Olifer, 2006; Sriyam 2010).

Activities that occur before the guest arrives at the property help to accelerate the registration process. Automated systems reformat data contained in a reservation record into the registration record. Typically, preregistered guests need only verify information already entered onto the registration record and sign a registration form or card. It helps managers plan for the special requirements of guests. Some preregistered guests and groups are checked in at a concierge desk or some other area apart from front desk. Some hotels limit preregistration services to VIP guests or groups. After guest arrival at the hotel, the front desk agent verifies a preregistration record or modify it to contain important information (Olifer & Olifer, 2006; Bardi 2007; Kokkinou & Cranage 2013).

Technology is used to push slower moving businesses by providing better service, improved decision making and increasing revenue. Hotel operators are now realizing that a brand in itself is not enough. Networks are used to link together computers, storage devices, printers, telephony and other electronic devices. The hotel's systems could be networked to share resources via either Local Area Network (LAN) or Wide Area Network (WAN). The LAN helps to share information within a hotel, such as from restaurant to front office and the WAN helps to share information from one hotel branch to another within the same chain across different geographical areas. Computers can connect to these networks to use facilities from another hotel or location (Kontoh *et al.*, 2012; Kokkinou & Cranage 2013)

Waiting lines are a common occurrence in many service settings where capacity is fixed as peak-time demand can exceed the available supply. For example, hotel guests arriving in the evening to check-in may encounter a full lobby. As waiting lines have been associated with reduced service evaluations, negative perceptions of service quality, and reduced satisfaction, having to wait makes a customer's first experience of a service is a negative one. Consequently, waiting-time reduction has been a major objective of service providers. Service providers have several strategies available to them to reduce customers' waiting-times. In theory, service providers could eliminate waiting lines by setting their capacity to peak demand (Olifer & Olifer, 2006; Kokkinou & Cranage 2013). However, most of this capacity would remain idle and would result in an unsustainable cost structure. Therefore, a more practical approach has been to use queuing theory and other operations management techniques to find the optimal point where the cost of providing service and customers' waiting time are simultaneously minimized (Hwang & Lambert, 2008; Kokkinou & Cranage 2013).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

An inductive, qualitative research design was undertaken utilizing semi-structured interviews addressed to rooms' division and front office managers in five star Hotels in Hurghada - Red Sea, Egypt, focusing on five star international chain hotels who don't adopt a developed GRC in order to minimize check-in duration. A semi-structured interview was used to combine the flexibility of the unstructured interviews with the comparability of the structured interviews (Preece 1994; Flick 1998; Finn *et al.*, 2000). Moreover, Woods (1998) mentioned that semi-structured interviews are conducted with a fairly open framework which allows focused, conversation for two-way communication.

Furthermore, Fontana & Frey (2005) stated that "the interview is considered as one of the most common and

powerful way in which both quality and quantity researchers tend to rely on the interviewee as the basic method of data gathering". Veal (1997) reported that the questionnaire is commonly used in tourism and leisure research because its basic mechanics are easily understood. Moreover, Bryman & Bell (2007) illustrated that "a questionnaire is a formal approach to measure the characteristics, attitudes, motivations, opinions and past, current and possible future behaviors". There are two important aspects for designing a questionnaire as indicated by Siniscalco & Auriat (2005), i.e. the structure of the question and the decision on the types of response formats for each question. In terms of questionnaire structure, Bryman & Bell (2007) stated that questions can be classified into two main structures which are: [1] close-ended questions and [2] open-ended questions. Both types of questions were used in this study in order to get more information and to help also to achieve the aim and objective of the research.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

A reliable accessible accommodation information source for the city of Hurghada was used to make preliminary hotel selections (The Egyptian Hotel Guide, 2015/2016). Twenty five semi-structured interviewees were conducted with rooms' division managers and front office managers working in five star hotels in Hurghada city providing accessible accommodation for disabled guests. Each interview lasted from 20 minutes to 30 minutes. The sample involved five star hotels in the area of Hurghada that were operated by chains of International Management Companies and also local chains operated by local management companies.

The results obtained from the semi-structured interviews which were statistically analyzed whenever needed by using SPSS version 16. Data and information found in the study were analyzed and discussed in accordance with the stated objectives.

RESULTS

This part of the study documents the perceptions of room division managers and front office managers from the five-star hotels in Hurghada about the preregistration procedures that can minimize the check-in duration and reflect an excellent guest experience especially for regulars and repeaters' guests. Respondents revealed some important information and the following summarized their opinion.

Some of the front office managers stated that reservation team needs a regular training about the use of their software application as some changes made on their software according to management request to have

particular reports and to use guests' information in order to develop a continuous satisfactory relationship with guests.

Most of rooms' division managers and front office managers who respond to the semi-structured interview confirmed that writing guests' name with different ways lead to duplicate many profiles for the same guest. This is considered a main barrier when reviewing guests' profile to design promotion programs for regulars and repeaters.

Respondents stressed that it is very important to be ready for the guests' arrival by reviewing each day's arrival and check the special requests and booking details for every guests, allocate room and it's category, confirmed special requests/requirements (e.g. always non-smoking prefers lower floor, etc.) and suitability.

Most of rooms' division managers revealed that reservation team should record and take into consideration the arrival time of the guest and prioritize guest with early arrival time. This will make the checking in procedures easier and save time, facilitate coordinating with concierge for any transportation requests and check for the room status and coordinate with housekeeping for rooms on priority.

Number of interviewed room division managers stressed on that one of the main failure made by most of the reservation department and front office department which is being unprepared to receive repeaters and regulars so when guests arrive it takes the same regular time to make the check-in procedures and this lead to unsatisfactory experience.

Respondents agreed that front office agents should coordinate with the sales group coordinator to get the group's information, get the group cover sheet, and coordinate with the airport desk and group coordinator and concierge desk to check if the group is on the way and to be ready to their check in.

Having enough data about the arriving guest will allow however will be in-charge of room assignment to block a very suitable room to each and every guest. Reservation department is requested to be more accurate when moving the online reservation details into the property system.

Respondents stated that knowing the total number of guests occupying the room especially in case of families by requesting each one's birthday will help the front desk in assigning suitable room size, extra beds and baby cots to be placed prior to arrival.

Also a number of respondents mentioned that it is very important that reservation agent record if the guest mentions that he or his companions are having a kind of

disabilities to assign the suitable room for this kind of disability and nearby the services area.

All of the respondents confirmed on the importance to prepare the registration cards in alphabetical order and have sufficient number of welcome packs ready. They also stressed on arranging the registration cards at the designated area in alphabetical order and coordinate with the concierge desk to arrange the luggage identification and delivery plan.

CONCLUSION

An effective reservation system helps maximize room sale by monitoring room availability and forecasting room revenue. By analyzing reservation information, front office management can develop and understand the hotel's reservation patterns. Data collected during the reservation process become especially useful in subsequent front office functions. Perhaps the most important outcome of a reservation is having the room available when the guest arrives. The paper looked in totality whether the impact of using Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) in the front office operations of international chain hotels is positive or negative. The use of IT has reduced queues to barely negligible at the front office during check-in because of the use of the Internet and Electronic Point-of-sale (EPOS) system that transfers instant charges on guest accounts.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Five star hotels should occasionally organize refresher courses for the front office staff to introduce them to new software and hardware applicable to their operations.
2. Reservation department should pay more attention when creating reservation profile in order to avoid misspelling of guests' names.
3. Reservation department should insure that guests' names don't exist in the PMS history before classifying it as a new reservation.
4. It will be much easier for both reservation and the front office to insert the full guests' data during the reservation process in order to save time and efforts when the guests arrive to check-in.
5. Repeater and regular guests as well as loyalty programs members will very much appreciate receiving a filled in registration card with the full details instead of receiving a blank one.
6. In case of group check-in having such details will defiantly lead to very smooth and quick check-in procedures.
7. Having enough data about the arriving guest will allow however will be in charge of room assignment to block a very suitable room to each and every guest.
8. Any time information such as the arrival time will give enough flexibility to the front desk especially if the property is running a very high occupancy.
9. A piece of information about the guest gender will facilitate the front desk job when choosing the type bed.
10. Reservation department is requested to be more accurate when moving the online reservation details into the property system.
11. Knowing precisely the total number of guests occupying the room by requesting each one's birthday will help the front desk to assign the suitable room.

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APPENDIX I

SEMI STRUCTURED INTERVIEW

Please tick (√) or provide the appropriate answers to the following questions where applicable.

1. Grade of the Hotel...

2. Type of management.

               International Chain [　]　　　　　　　　　Local Chain [　]

3. What is your position?....................……...

4. How long have you been working in this hotel?...

5. What is your current position?...

6. How long have you been in this position?...

7. How long has your hotel or office been using Information Technology in guests' booking?......................................
....

8. Has the use of Information and Communication Technologies made any effect on your hotels and office?

Yes [　] No [　]

(guests satisfaction, less failures, easy for plan, etc…......)

…………………………………………………………………………………………......................................
....

9. What significant change has Information Technology brought on the front office operations or your office?

Positive [　] Negative [　]

Please give reasons for your answer.

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10. How many times does your hotel go on training?

Once a year [ ] Twice a year [ ] Thrice a year [ ]

11. What impact does the training bring on you (front office staff) and the hotel? Positive [ ]   Negative [ ]

………………………………………………………………………………………………..…………………

…………………………………………………………...

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12. How is the use of Information Technology in front office operation?

Easy to use [ ] Difficult to use [ ] Please give reasons for your answer.

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13. What are the main barriers facing your work when making guest' check in?

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14. Does the on line reservation sites linked with the PMS of your hotel?

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