

ASIAN HOTEL & CATERING TIMES

PUBLISHED SINCE 1976

Vol 40 May/June 2015



THE TECHNOLOGY MIX

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ONLINE OFFERINGS

Getting bookings and
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ADAPT & ENHANCE

The evolution of housekeeping

Hong Kong SAR	HK\$50
China	RMB50
Singapore	S\$15
Malaysia	RM30
Thailand	Bt300
Rest of Asia	US\$10



Hello Housekeeping

Housekeeping is all about improving and enhancing the quality of services. What are hotel operators doing to achieve this and how are they being helped by service providers? *Jane Ram finds out*

Increasing automation has almost eliminated opportunities for human contact in many hotels.

Housekeeping is perhaps the last frontier where tasks are still routinely performed by real human beings, albeit at times when they are least likely to have contact with guests.

While bed-making and bathroom cleaning must still be done by people, housekeeping has been undergoing its own technological revolution.

Focussed software has transformed what was formerly regarded as the Cinderella of hotel operations, typically staffed by employees with low education and minimal language skills.

Specialised service providers have helped hoteliers streamline their housekeeping operations, freeing up precious human

resources from back-of-house duties to front-of-house deployment.

Once a Property Management System (PMS) is in place, it can increase scope for personal touches while at the same time providing seamless inter-department links, improving efficiency, saving time and labour, and enhancing management efficiency, says Indra Budiman, CEO of Hansar Hotels & Resorts.

"An integrated system provides many features, including real-time room status which can be updated in each room, providing better communication tools to manage guest arrival and departure.

"Options include creating housekeeping reports for all or selected rooms and tracking housekeeping assignments, status discrepancies, and off-market rooms.

"A PMS tracks current status of all

units and makes it possible to view the complete history of cleaning, inspection and occupancy information."

Other benefits include automated task sheet creation, queue room handling, turn-down service, room based checklists, inspection lists and off-market rooms.

Size of property and cost govern whether or not a PMS system is appropriate. But such systems have been shown to increase efficiency by 15% and eliminate 90% of room coordination phone calls.

"Higher guest satisfaction can be achieved due to smooth synergy between departments," Budiman notes.

"Rooms are prepared faster, reducing guest wait time, and personal touches can be added as there is more time for this small yet well-received extra.

"Supervisors can closely monitor specials, preferences and traces on attendants' task sheets, focussing on automated work orders as sometimes these tasks are time consuming and can be loose tracked if being done manually."

Supplying guest and business applications to over three million hotel rooms worldwide, FCS Computer



Systems' vice-president strategy and global development, Akina Ho points out that the technology is all about management in real-time to reduce costs and increase revenue.

"FCS e-Housekeeping solution has proven to streamline housekeeping activities, improve guest experience, and save hotels hundreds of thousands of dollars annually.

"Another very important consideration is that by digitising assignments and inspections sheets onto our mobile app seven to eight trees can be saved annually in an average 300-room hotel."

Newly-opened boutique resort The Sanchaya Bintan uses Protel property management software to keep track of details and job allocation for villa attendants, says acting estate manager Anshuman Narayan.

"Prior to arrival guests receive an online preference planner regarding such details as pillow requirements, bath set up and music."

Housekeeping sets up the villa according to the guest's wishes, Narayan explains. "Butlers check guests' preferred time of servicing the villa, and the information is

relayed to the housekeeping team.

"Guest preference information is also gathered during their stay, regarding which side of the bed they sleep on, books they are reading so they can be placed on the appropriate side of the bed during turn-down.

"Last but not least, a system is in place to make each artisan aware of guest names so they can be addressed by name throughout our estate."

All in the training

Housekeeping is about more than cleaning and making beds, says Pledy Lui Yu-chor, chief instructor (housekeeping), at Hong Kong's Vocational Training Council's (VTC) Hospitality Industry Training and Development Centre. The VTC has recently introduced specialist courses which cover the various areas of expertise required by housekeeping professionals.

"Housekeeping is a profession with internationally recognised standards," says Lui.



Peter Jones, executive housekeeper
The Langham, Melbourne

Examinations give access to membership of the International Executive Housekeepers Association.

"Housekeeping covers environmental and sustainability management, inventory control, microbiology and bacteriology, and all-round managerial skills including financial and HR," says Lui.

For those interested in pursuing a career in this industry, VTC courses range from a Certificate in Housekeeping Operations to guide students with no knowledge of the industry and equip them with basic knowledge while the Certificate in Housekeeping Supervision is aimed at those who are already working in the industry with ambitions to reach a supervisory or managerial role.

"Professional housekeepers have lots of opportunities," Lui says, adding that the new trend is for those with housekeeping experience to upgrade their skills by enrolling in training programmes for professional butlers.

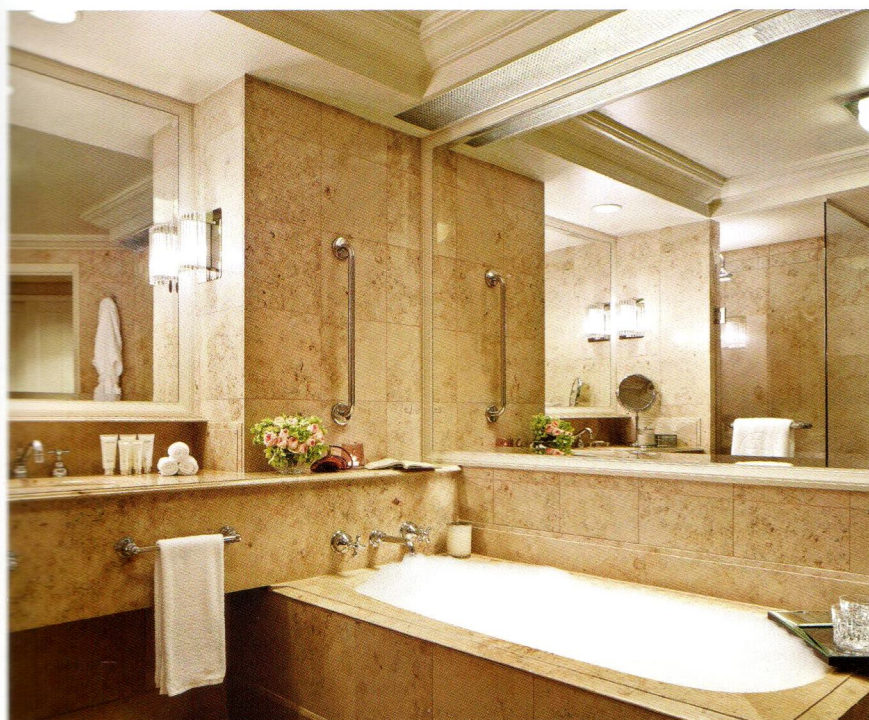
"Such training enables a graduate to excel in his or her chosen career, work in a private club or even in a diplomatic household.

"Under VTC, a programme is offered by a UK trainer who works for the Royal Family. The students are trained in protocol, etiquette and manners as well as personal guest services."

Such considerations are important at The Langham, Melbourne, which maintains traditions while embracing modern technology, says executive housekeeper, Peter Jones.

Higher guest satisfaction can be achieved due to smooth synergy between departments

Indra Budiman, CEO Hansar Hotels & Resorts



Always seeking improvement at The Langham, Melbourne

Pledy Lui Yu-Chor, chief instructor (housekeeping) HK's VTC



Soenke Weiss CEO
Optii Solutions –
making it relevant



Nothing beats the personal touch at The Langham, Melbourne

One of the city's few hotels to still offer a nightly turn-down service, while at the same time using pink iPods to communicate between departments.

"Using iPods enables housekeepers to log jobs so the team may remain on the floor, which reduces paperwork and improves productivity," Jones says.

"It's part of our DNA to seek out continuous improvement. For instance, at the moment we're reviewing a new system that will allow room attendants to carry hand-held devices; this will help decrease room turnaround time and calls between front office and housekeeping, improve the ability to adapt and change as required and more easily recognise high-performing staff. We can even predict consumption for linen, amenities and minibar items to further anticipate our guests' needs.

"But, nothing beats a personal

connection with our guests and we encourage our teams to be visible and communicate with guests. Each housekeeper adds a personal touch of a hand-written card stating who cleaned their room. It's a simple gesture but we receive lovely feedback from guests about it."

Soenke Weiss, CEO Optii Solutions, says Optii pioneered a software product specifically focussed on housekeeping and every subsequent housekeeping product, such as FCS and HotSOS, are add-ons to other software products that were "typically focussed on request management and engineering: housekeeping is therefore an 'after-thought'."

Optii "doesn't really add a personal touch, as the individuals are working more independently, while singing to the same tunebook," says Weiss.

"It makes the personal interactions

that do take place, like training and others, more relevant to the individuals. For example, Optii identifies individual strengths and weaknesses. This means less blanket treatment and good employees are recognised and 'bad' ones get identified. We have had comments such as, 'Finally management knows that 'X' is a slacker!'"

Optii originated in a housekeeping consulting company. "It's a more efficient way of managing housekeeping personnel at a process level," Weiss says.

"We have since patented these processes around the world and have created the Optii Keeper software to implement them.

"It's just like revenue management. While the concepts are simple, the implementation is complex and requires software. Optii can produce substantial improvements in productivity in hotels, as

much as 24% in some cases.

"Software is a tool. It's all about the product. Optii improves inter-departmental contact," Weiss says.

"The traditional approach expects all rooms to require the same amount of time but each is different according to the occupant. A typical conference attendee will spend very little time in the room, which leaves it needing little more than a quick clean. But I know if my kids are with me the cleaning will take much longer than if I am on my own.

"Optii can intelligently predict the state of the room and the time required to clean it according to the number of occupants, number of children, country of origin and other factors that will all add up to an accurate prediction. Improved communication, improved efficiency. Greater satisfaction all round." **AHCT**