Humans vs tech in the age of hospitality labour shortages

By [Lauren Hartzenberg](#)   24 May 2022

With the essence and tradition of hospitality grounded in human connection, what role will technology fulfill in enhancing the guest experience?

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Speaking in a panel on the Travel Tech Stage at [Arabian Travel Market](#) this month, Dimitris Manikis, president EMEA at Wyndham Hotels and Resorts, said "In hospitality, I personally believe you have to love people to be in this business."

According to him, technology is an "enabler" that should be embraced, but fully-digital hotel concepts lack the important element of the interpersonal relationship, which Manikis feels is a big part of what drives many people to travel in the first place.

Christopher Hartley, CEO at Global Hotel Alliance, echoed this point, adding that leisure guests in particular value human interaction. "There are some types of customer who absolutely want human interaction. I think especially with upscale hotel brands, leisure guests have more time in particular in that segment and expect human interaction when entering a hotel and interacting with staff. It's at the forefront of what hospitality is about," he said.

Seamless pre-arrival organisation

However, where technology can add significant value to the guest experience is before check-in. In this stage, guests don't always want to speak to people, Hartley said, and technology is able to eliminate superfluous interaction and simplify pre-arrival organisation - from guest identification and reservation management based on individual customer preferences.

Looking towards technological impact over the next few years, Hartley said, "Hotels deliver the customer experience and the product; that won't change much. For pre-arrival though, we need technology to improve engagement with customers because that will help reduce the cost of doing business. Keep in mind that profitability will remain an issue for the coming three years."

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Staff shortages a growing concern

Meanwhile, Manikis cautioned that in the midst of a global hospitality labour shortage, the industry needs to be careful about the digitalisation message it's putting out. "It pushes people out of the industry," he said.

With accommodation establishments having layed off or furloughed many positions during the height of the pandemic, the hospitality industry is now finding that a lot of workers are not returning and is now facing a labour shortage. And as more countries open to travellers, hotels are discovering they do not have the staff complement required to service them.

Manikis called it "one of the greatest challenges" the industry will have to face, noting that younger generations are either not entering hospitality or are not remaining in it.

"The hotel of the future should not have a back office and a front office. It's not an office but a community. The way we position ourselves as an industry needs to change, otherwise we won't be successful, no matter what technology we deploy," Manikis said.

Enticing corporate environment

As the Global Hotel Alliance doesn't operate hotels, but is more of a marketing technology company, Hartley was able to weigh in and point out that the corporate office environment of hospitality is very attractive to the incoming workforce.

"The people we hire tend to be tech-savvy marketeers. So for us, attracting those people is more about competing for the best talent. I think what's happened at hotels over the last 20 or 30 years is that everything has been centralised, and technology has enabled that.

"Graduates want to go into marketing and tech, because that's where the money is, that's where all the disruption is happening, and that's where all new technology is emerging from. We have millions more university graduates than we had 20 years ago, but they don't want to take that learning and apply it in a hotel operation. That's the challenge we have."

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The life of working in a hotel often comes with shift work and relatively low pay, Hartley added. "The attractiveness of hospitality because of tech has moved into the corporate office environment, and operators must rethink how they attract people back into the hotel. You need employees who really want to interact with customers, and who share a love of hospitality and of people."

Manikis encouraged businesses to make technology a key part of their strategy and operations, but added, "One thing I think we all learnt during the pandemic is the need to go back to basics, because it's the human element that kept us all going."

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