

today's hotelier

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Publication of AAHOA

Montu Patel,
Managing Member
of IHM LLC

Charting the
twists and
turns in the
career of
longtime
AAHOA
Member

Montu Patel

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Harnessing
the power of
new technology
to solve old
problems

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Exploring the
industry's
future with the
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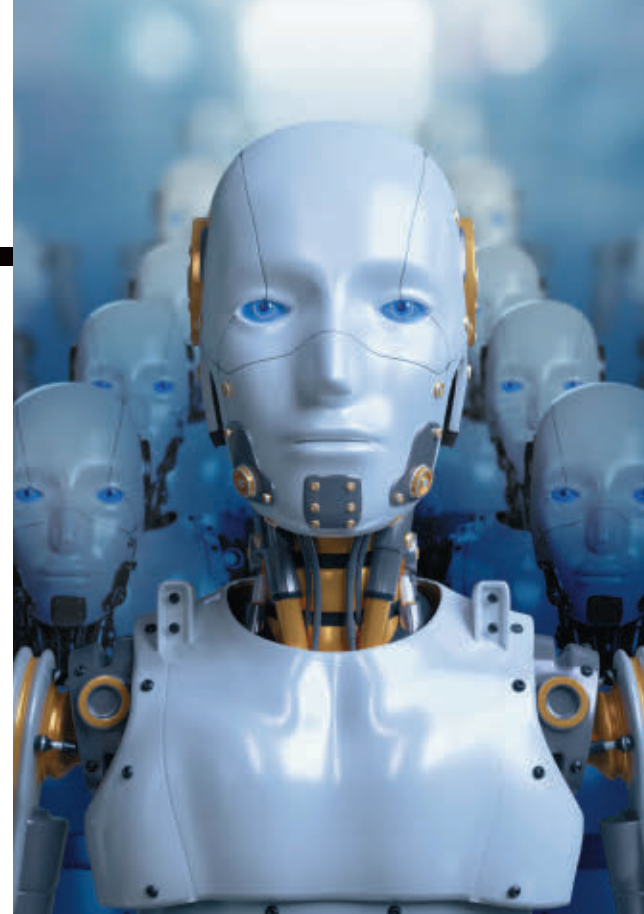
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5 Things to Know About AAHOA This Month

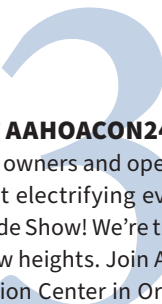


FROM TRIUMPHS TO NEW HORIZONS: HAPPY NEW YEAR FROM AAHOA

2023 was a year of remarkable and historic achievements at AAHOA. As we step into 2024, let's carry the spirit of innovation and unity with us, continuing to build a stronger, brighter, and more vibrant industry. Here's wishing you a Happy New Year filled with joy, success, and endless possibilities from the AAHOA family to yours! Check out the Q&A on page 26 to learn more from the AAHOA Board of Directors on what they expect to see in the industry in this year and beyond.

CHART A NEW HOSPITALITY COURSE AT AAHOACON24

The nation's largest event exclusively for hotel owners and operators is three months away. Get ready for the most electrifying event in hospitality – the 2024 AAHOA Convention & Trade Show! We're turning up the excitement and taking hospitality to new heights. Join AAHOA April 2-5, 2024, at the Orange County Convention Center in Orlando, FL. AAHOACON24 is not just a get-together; it's a reunion of old pals and the chance to make a wave of new ones. It will be bigger, bolder, and brighter than ever before. Register today: AAHOACON.com.



JOIN AAHOA IN THE FIGHT AGAINST HUMAN TRAFFICKING THIS MONTH

January is designated National Human Trafficking Prevention Month by presidential proclamation, a time for individuals and businesses to raise awareness, educate, and prevent human trafficking. As an organization representing nearly 20,000 hotel owners who own 60% of the hotels in the U.S., AAHOA has long been at the forefront of the hospitality industry's battle against human trafficking. You can help prevent this horrible crime from taking place on your hotel properties when you complete the Businesses Ending Slavery and Trafficking (BEST) Inhospitable to Human Trafficking Training Sponsored by AAHOA. The training takes 30 minutes to complete, and it's **FREE for AAHOA Members and their employees.** AAHOA.com/HTAT



ARE YOU PASSIONATE ABOUT SHAPING THE FUTURE OF HOTEL OWNERSHIP?

Attention AAHOA Members. Here's your golden opportunity to help drive the strategic direction of a national association dedicated to advancing and protecting the interests of hotel owners. When you join AAHOA's 2024-2025 Board of Directors, your voice becomes the driving force for America's hotel owners. The 2024-25 AAHOA Board of Directors candidate nomination period will end on Sunday, February 4, 2024. Submit nominations today: bit.ly/3RL1RJU



DID YOU KNOW? AAHOA LAUNCHED HYPE OWNERSHIP IN DECEMBER

AAHOA launched HYPE Ownership: Helping Young Professionals Evolve, an initiative dedicated to fostering the growth and success of emerging hoteliers within AAHOA and across the broader industry. As part of the inaugural launch, AAHOA is hosting the first-ever Young Professionals HYPE Ownership Conference on February 6-7, 2024, in New Orleans, LA. To learn more about AAHOA's HYPE Ownership event, visit MyAAHOA.com.





BHARAT PATEL, CHO, CHIA
AAHOA CHAIRMAN (2023-2024)

Technology's power to shape the industry

“Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic.” – Arthur C. Clarke

“

Technology is changing the way the hospitality industry does business. It feels like what used to take a year, now takes months, and I believe technology is the key to growing your bottom line and driving positive business outcomes.”

LAST APRIL, AT THE 2023 AAHOA CONVENTION & TRADE SHOW, AAHOACON23, A company named Virdee took home the top prize in the AAHOA 2023 Tech Pitch Competition, Co-Powered by HFTP, for its virtual reception software, which is aimed at helping properties become more efficient.

While there were many great companies that participated in the competition, Virdee rose above the pack by fulfilling its goal to free up staff in a way that allows them to deliver a true guest experience.

The ongoing workforce shortage has been a huge problem for our industry, so we're always looking for innovative ideas and products that will help the hospitality industry solve everyday issues as hoteliers continue to face challenges, like workforce shortages.

Technology is changing the way the hospitality industry does business. It feels like what used to take a year, now takes months, and I believe technology is the key to growing your bottom line and driving positive business outcomes.

With that in mind, the hotel industry is also one of many taking advantage of artificial intelligence – or AI. In an industry that has always traditionally needed human interactions 24/7, AI is starting to play a huge role in carrying out those functions. Whether it's kiosks instead of front desk agents or robots cleaning rooms, hotel owners are able to supplement their staff using technology.

AI not only helps with labor-shortage issues, but it helps hotel owners save money, avoid mistakes, and oftentimes provide even better service.

Technology also gives us a larger audience. Let's face it: People are attached to their phones these days. Hotel owners are able to communicate with current and potential customers, giving us the opportunity to respond quicker and provide information in a timely manner. This all helps improve customer service and, ultimately, customer satisfaction.

We use technology from start to finish when it comes to hotels these days. We use technology to explore options, book rooms, keep travel documents, check-in, communicate during the stay, checkout – the list goes on.

We couldn't have predicted 20 years ago how much the industry would evolve, and it's difficult to predict how much more it will evolve in another 20 years. But we do know that technology is here to stay, and it's only getting more advanced.

It's our job to keep up, or we will certainly be left behind. ■



LAURA LEE BLAKE, ESQ.
AAHOA PRESIDENT & CEO

“

As hotel owners continue to adapt to the times and continue to add more technology to their daily operations, it is imperative that strategies, policies, and guidelines are created to protect those using this technology.”

Understanding the pros and cons of technology

“Investing in tomorrow’s technology today is more critical than ever...” – Bill Gates

TECHNOLOGY CAN OFTEN BE A BLESSING AND A CURSE. IT HAS ENABLED US TO come so far but has created problems when it does not work as intended or is abused. We know hotels are attractive targets for cyber thieves and vandals. With their wealth of personal and financial information, hotel owners, chains, and booking partner sites are on the front lines of protecting Americans’ data.

In recent years, hotel brands in Germany, the UK, and the U.S. have confronted successful cyberattacks. In some cases, user data was compromised. In others, the attacks targeted systems that did not store sensitive information about hotel guests.

Even when user data is not compromised, breaches can be hugely disruptive to business and undermine guests’ confidence. AAHOA members are committed to outstanding guest experiences from the moment someone logs into a booking site until they check out of their room. Electronic systems are not peripheral to the guest experience, so hotel chains must take every possible step to guard against bad actors who are working 24-7 to penetrate vulnerable systems. Hotel owners, including AAHOA Members, pay monthly technology fees to franchisors that are intended to fortify cyber defenses.

PURPOSE OF THE CYBER SECURITY PRINCIPLES

The purpose of the cyber security principles is to provide strategic guidance on how an organization can protect their systems and data from cyber threats. These cyber security principles are grouped into four key activities: govern, protect, detect and respond.

- ➔ **Govern:** Identifying and managing security risks.
- ➔ **Protect:** Implementing controls to reduce security risks.
- ➔ **Detect:** Detecting and understanding cyber security events to identify.

AAHOA’s 20,000 Members own 60% of U.S. hotels, and one of their biggest challenges is staying up to date with technologies that make it easier for guests to book rooms, customize their experiences, and simplify their stay.

Small businesses, including individual hotels, often have fewer resources to guard against sophisticated cyber criminals. The bipartisan infrastructure bill includes \$100 million for a fund to help victims of major cyberattacks recover from them, and lawmakers are considering additional steps to help small businesses strengthen their defenses.

The only way people can feel confident about moving toward a more technologically savvy business model is if they know it is protected.

It is obvious hotels are having to depend on technology more and more, helping provide convenience and assisting many businesses in a challenging time. How do we balance that?

As hotel owners continue to adapt to the times and continue to add more technology to their daily operations, it is imperative that strategies, policies, and guidelines are created to protect those using this technology.

That being said, there needs to be some serious thought regarding the policies of the technology to provide a better environment for using it without fear of a breach, or without putting livelihoods on the line. ■

CORNERSTONE

conversation

Charting the twists and turns in the career of longtime AAHOA Member Montu Patel

by EVELYN HOOVER

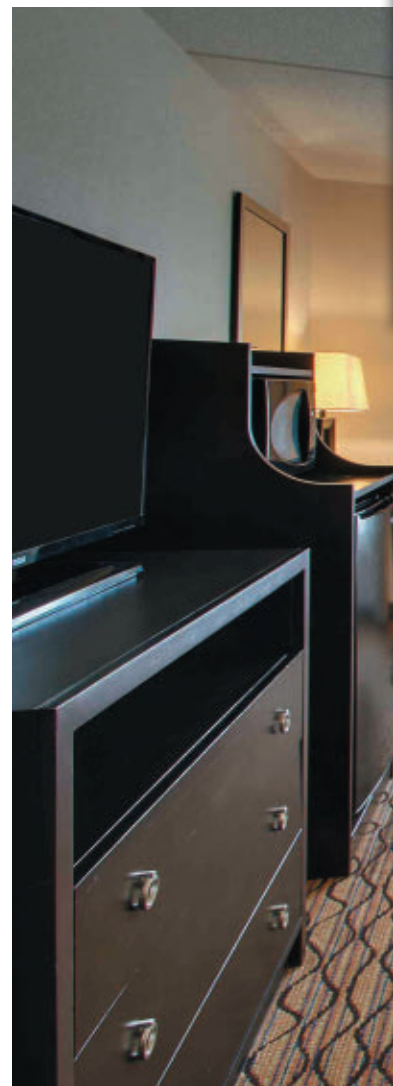
EMBARKING ON A JOURNEY that began with his family's venture into the hotel industry many years ago, AAHOA Member Montu Patel's trajectory has been nothing short of remarkable. From a childhood spent immersed in the operations of his parent's first hotel to becoming the head of Innovative Hospitality Management and Lotus Park Senior Living, Patel's story is one of resilience, innovation, and dedicated leadership. His strategic approach involves a keen understanding of eroding margins, inflation, and the impact of interest rates on return on investment. Beyond his entrepreneurial pursuits, Patel is actively engaged in charitable work, driven by personal experiences with brain cancer. This interview provides a glimpse into Patel's multifaceted career, his insights into industry dynamics, and his dedication to making a positive impact both professionally and philanthropically.

HOW DID YOUR HOTEL JOURNEY UNFOLD?

My journey in the hotel industry started at the age of six, when my father, originally a chemist at Campbell Soup in Canada, was presented with an opportunity to invest in a Howard Johnson's in New Jersey. My father immigrated to the U.S. on a business visa to begin his hotel journey. My mother, sister, and I moved shortly thereafter. Living on-site in room 141 at Howard Johnson's, I had a dynamic childhood, helping my parents in any way I could with the hotel's day-to-day operations.

HOW LONG HAVE YOU BEEN AN AAHOA MEMBER, AND WHAT LED TO YOUR INITIAL INVOLVEMENT WITH THE ASSOCIATION?

In my childhood, AAHOA Members were frequent visitors to our home, and I vividly remember attending AAHOA events with my sister and dad. We would help distribute fliers or assist with check-ins. Our





AAHOA Member
Montu Patel

home even served as a gathering place for AAHOA Members. My journey with AAHOA began during its early days, and that initial connection has remained strong throughout the years.

YOU'VE CERTAINLY MADE REMARKABLE STRIDES SINCE YOUR INITIAL INVOLVEMENT IN YOUR FAMILY'S FIRST HOTEL IN NEW JERSEY. WHAT'S YOUR CURRENT ROLE IN THE INDUSTRY?

We own and operate 11 hotels. We also have hotels that we invest in that we don't operate. We have senior living communities that we built from the ground up. I'm the managing member of Innovative Hospitality Management and Lotus Park Senior Living and am thankful to count on a team of wonderful people who help bring it all to life and are really the backbone of what makes these companies successful.





Montu and his sister, Payal, in front of the Econo Lodge their parents owned in Bordentown, NJ, in 1983.



The Econo Lodge Montu Patel's parents owned in Bordentown, NJ.

“

Regardless of whether you're at the front desk, managing housekeeping, serving as the general manager, or holding any other position, the path to becoming a multi-unit operator or revolutionizing your hotel management begins with education.”

WHAT IS A CONCERN YOU HAVE REGARDING THE CURRENT STATE OF THE INDUSTRY?

The margin in our industry continues to erode. When I look at the top line of total revenue and the percentage that goes to the bottom line, more and more of that is eroding. When you factor in inflation and ADR growth, it becomes clear the return on investment isn't as robust as it should be, especially considering the challenges posed by the new interest-rate environment we find ourselves navigating.

HOW DO YOU ENSURE THE RESILIENCE OF YOUR REAL ESTATE PROJECTS, ESPECIALLY THOSE WITH HOTELS, IN THE FACE OF EVOLVING FINANCIAL LANDSCAPES AND POTENTIAL SHIFTS IN INVESTMENT DYNAMICS?

When you look at cash flow after distribution, your internal rate of return that you get today, tomorrow, and probably during the next 18 months, based on the kind of loan you lock in, will be a pretty low return. I believe we will see a comeback as interest rates begin to drop. I hope our debt cost is

cut in half during the next 36 to 40 months. I believe times will get better for having that cash flow after debt service. This is critical for us as owners. We want to continue to build, construct, and operate real estate boxes that have hotels on their front door, and not have to look at alternative uses and sources for real estate.

YOUR PERSPECTIVE EXTENDS BEYOND A SPECIFIC SECTOR TO THE BROADER REAL ESTATE LANDSCAPE. CAN YOU SHARE WHAT FACTORS YOU CONSIDER WHEN DECIDING TO PIVOT TO DIFFERENT INDUSTRIES WITHIN THE REAL ESTATE ARENA?

Ultimately, I'm in the real estate business. Whether it's senior living facilities, multifamily housing, hotels, whatever it is, it's real estate. If the cash flow after debt service isn't there because of an eroding margin, then I've got to be able to pivot to other industries that are still in the real estate arena that we know how to develop and build but that we have better control of the expense basis so we can continue to make returns that are acceptable for investors.

YOUR DECISION TO EXPLORE REAL ESTATE BEYOND THE HOTEL INDUSTRY IS FASCINATING. HOW DID YOUR QUEST TO BE THE MASTER OF YOUR DESTINY LEAD TO VENTURES LIKE SENIOR LIVING COMMUNITIES?

My sister and I were really interested in real estate in other forms, and not just the hotel industry, as we saw that our ADR wasn't keeping up with inflation at that time. Forget about now; I'm talking about at that time. During the past 30 years, room rates haven't done a great job of keeping up with inflation. When I look at the eroding margin of all the expenses layered into franchise hotel operations, I became concerned the rate of returns that our investors were seeking wouldn't be sustainable in the future. I needed to make sure I was the master of my destiny. That's why I looked at uncovering other real estate businesses. For senior living, as an example, we incorporated our hospitality background into assisted living. Our buildings are designed in a way that looks different than other senior living communities.

IN YOUR VIEW, WHAT SETS THE AAHOA COMMUNITY APART?

AAHOA has been absolutely instrumental in our company being where it is today. It afforded us the opportunity to network

with people who had different mindsets, different ways of tackling and approaching the same problem and coming up with a different solution. AAHOA Members are always willing to share those solutions. And that, I believe, is part of AAHOA's secret sauce and what makes this association so great. You rarely find an AAHOA Member who does not want to help another member.

YOUR EXTENSIVE EXPERIENCE WITH AAHOA IS NOTEWORTHY. CAN YOU DELVE INTO HOW THIS ASSOCIATION HAS PLAYED A CRUCIAL ROLE IN SHAPING NOT JUST YOUR CAREER BUT THE SUCCESS OF MANY OTHERS IN THE INDUSTRY?

AAHOA has always had the foresight to encourage members to volunteer on industry committees, engage with owner associations, and actively participate in franchisor hotel ownership groups. These types of involvement empowered me and many others to make our voices heard and foster a culture of education. You couple that with pursuing the AAHOA Certificate in Hotel Ownership® (CHO), and it becomes a transformative journey, making individuals better business owners and smarter entrepreneurs.

YOU'RE AN ACTIVE AAHOA MEMBER, BUT YOU'VE ALSO SERVED ON THE CHOICE HOTEL OWNERS COUNCIL. CAN YOU SHED LIGHT ON WHY YOU BELIEVE HOTEL OWNERS SHOULD BE INVOLVED WITH INDUSTRY ORGANIZATIONS?

Regardless of whether you're at the front desk, managing housekeeping, serving as the general manager, or holding any other position, the path to becoming a multi-unit operator or revolutionizing your hotel management begins with education. Volunteering with organizations like AAHOA, or joining a committee, is an excellent way of educating yourself. Members think it's hard to join a committee, or it may take too much time. There are a lot of buts and can'ts. Playing an active role in organizations like AAHOA is one of your most significant investments. The returns are lifetime friends, a group of people you can count on, and top-level education.

BEYOND YOUR ACHIEVEMENTS AS AN ENTREPRENEUR AND HOTELIER, YOUR DEDICATION TO CHARITABLE ENDEAVORS IS REMARKABLE. COULD YOU DELVE INTO THE MOTIVATION BEHIND YOUR ACTIVE INVOLVEMENT WITH CHARITY WORK?

It was crucial for me not only to contribute financially but also to invest more of my time in the causes dear to my heart. I try to work every Wednesday at a community kitchen, cooking meals for those in need. I also volunteer with the National Brain Tumor Society. My sister passed away from a glioblastoma, a type of brain cancer, 11 and a half months after being diagnosed. I've done a number of things for NBTS. You wouldn't believe how small the charity is, but the significant impact it has on Capitol Hill. It's instrumental in getting funding and research dollars to help find treatment options for brain cancer and different types of brain tumors. There are

many forms of brain cancer, but GBM is probably the deadliest form of it. It has a high death rate, unfortunately. We've done 5K walks in our community in conjunction with Race for Hope.

HOW HAVE YOUR HOSPITALITY SKILLS CONTRIBUTED TO YOUR EFFECTIVENESS IN SERVING THE COMMUNITY IN A LEADERSHIP CAPACITY?

Giving back to our local community as a hotelier is important. As an elected school board member in my community, I've found my skill set as a hotelier and entrepreneur was transferable to running for elected office and serving the community in this capacity. Local community organizations are actively seeking dedicated volunteers, and I firmly believe AAHOA Members possess the strength and skills required for such roles. I encourage AAHOA Members of all ages to get involved in meaningful ways in the New Year. ■



ROBOTS ON YOUR ROSTER

Looking to
technology
to address
day-to-day
challenges

by NICK FORTUNA

THE SHORT ROBOT ON WHEELS WILL NEVER call out sick or complain about patrolling a hotel parking lot amid a summer heatwave. Likewise, the strikingly human-like robot will never need a bathroom break or get tired of answering the same questions repeatedly.

The next generation of robots, powered by artificial intelligence, offers a glimpse into the hospitality industry's future. Along with AI-powered smartphone apps and chatbots, these robots promise to significantly reduce the manpower needed for hotel operations, though they risk alienating guests who still prefer service with a human smile. More on that later.

This past September featured several major developments for robots in the hospitality industry. The first came when PENN Entertainment announced it would deploy Knightscope's K5 autonomous security robots at 43 of its properties, which include casinos, racetracks, and hotels. That decision followed testing periods at several PENN properties, including the M Resort Spa Casino in Las Vegas.



4 HOTEL TECH TRENDS FOR 2024

SUSTAINABILITY

A growing number of hotel companies are installing solar panels, heat pumps, and other energy upgrades to appeal to environmentally conscious consumers and to cut costs.

Tech upgrades include LED lighting, smart thermostats, and motion sensors that detect when a room is empty and reduce energy consumption. To conserve water, hotels are installing low-flow faucets, showerheads, and toilets, along with rainwater-harvesting systems for irrigation.

DIGITAL TIPPING

Since fewer guests are carrying cash, they need an easy way to tip service workers such as housekeepers, bartenders, and bell staff using their smartphones. Hotels are turning to digital tipping apps that allow guests to scan a QR code or click a link and tip workers using their credit cards or other digital payment methods.

AI-POWERED REVENUE MANAGEMENT

The latest hotel-industry software uses AI to predict demand for rooms and services, recommend rates, and manage promotions and special offers both online and onsite. The software takes data from a variety of sources, including online travel agencies and internal hotel systems, and instantly makes recommendations for rates and promotions.

SMARTPHONES AS ROOM KEYS

Many hotels are using check-in kiosks that can dispense plastic keys, but some hotels are eschewing plastic keys altogether.

Using Bluetooth-enabled locks that typically are easy to install, hotels can enable guests to unlock their guestroom doors with their smartphones. Improvements to near-field communication technology now allow newer smartphones to serve as mobile keys even if they've run out of battery life, removing an early barrier to mobile key systems.



Knightscope's K5 autonomous security robots, coming soon to a property near you?



The second big development also took place in the entertainment capital of the world. The Sphere, a \$2.3 billion entertainment venue that opened September 29, unveiled its Aura humanoid robots, which are capable of interacting with guests and answering their questions about the facility.

Facing a prolonged labor shortage, many tech-savvy hoteliers surely have considered adding robot butlers to bring room service and fresh towels to guests. But the newest robots are capable of much more than that. Equipped with machine-learning and facial-recognition technology, they can help hotels and entertainment venues provide a safer environment for guests and a more-personalized level of service.

ROBOTS ON PATROL

The K5 robot can travel indoors or outdoors at up to three miles per hour, reducing the need for security guards to make rounds. It can play recorded messages to greet guests and direct them throughout the property. And if guests need help or have a question, they can press an intercom button and reach a worker at the hotel.

The K5's high-definition cameras can record incidents and allow hotel workers to see and hear what's happening on the property in real time.

The robot also can read license plates and alert security

professionals when unauthorized vehicles enter the parking lot.

Similar robots are providing security at malls, sporting venues, hospitals, and universities. At Mercedes-Benz Stadium, for example, Benzie the DroneDog, developed by Boston Dynamics and Asylon Robotics, patrols the 11-acre home of the Atlanta Falcons and Atlanta United FC. The robot can read license plates, recognize faces, detect narcotics and explosives, and send real-time video back to security personnel.

Knightscope said its stationary K1 Tower robot uses facial-recognition technology to benefit casinos in several ways. It recognizes players who've been banned for bad behavior, along with people who are trying to quit gambling and have signed up for voluntary exclusion, helping casinos fulfill regulatory requirements.

The robot also can identify VIPs and members of loyalty clubs, enabling hotels to cater to their best customers. When a rewards member enters the hotel, for instance, the robot can send an alert to workers' smart devices with information about that customer's preferences.

In theory, a bartender could use that information to greet a VIP customer with his favorite drink as soon as the patron sits down. Alternatively, when a guest leaves the hotel, the robot could send a



message stating that the room is ready for housekeeping.

On the Las Vegas Strip, many hotels have security guards checking hotel room keys when guests head from the casino floor to the hotel elevators. Robots eventually could streamline that process and reduce the headcount needed for security.

Several Las Vegas properties already have installed robots in their lobbies as guest ambassadors. Guests at the Mandarin Oriental Hotel, for example, can interact with Pepper, a four-foot-tall robot with expressive eyes and human movements that can answer guests' questions about the property and the surrounding area.



The Knightscope K1 Tower robot is currently employed primarily in casinos or on properties where facial recognition is crucial.

IMAGE COURTESY OF MERCEDES-BENZ STADIUM



Benzie the Drone Dog, developed by Boston Dynamics and Asylon Robotics, patrols Mercedes-Benz Stadium in Atlanta to read license plates, perform facial recognition, and detect dangerous substances.

Other hospitality robots aren't quite that smart, but they still can prove invaluable to understaffed hotels. A number of manufacturers, including Aethon, Bear Robotics, Blue Pin, CTRL Robotics, Keenon Robotics, and RobotLAB, are producing robots that can deliver items to hotel guests, sanitize rooms, and handle luggage.

Robot butlers have yet to gain widespread adoption in U.S. hotels, but that may change as competition among manufacturers leads to lower prices, according to Dr. Mehmet Erdem, professor of hotel operations and technology at UNLV's William F. Harrah College of Hospitality. Robots eventually may reduce labor costs for hotels, but many leisure travelers might become dissatisfied with the guest experience, he said.

"When everything is automated, it's almost like getting your hotel experience out of a vending machine," Erdem said. "If you're an on-the-go businessperson, it works, but for other guests, the experience is very different."

HOW MUCH IS TOO MUCH?

Hoteliers are in a difficult spot when it comes to technology, Erdem said. On the one hand, they must continue their technological investments to keep up with their competitors and with the technology guests are enjoying in their homes. On the other hand, new technology is costly, and if it's not reliable and user-friendly, it can frustrate guests and lead to poor guest-satisfaction scores, he said.

"Hoteliers are asking themselves, 'Do we need all this technology for a customizable experience? How much is too much?'" Erdem said. "If you don't adopt new technology, some of your competitors will. When you stay at a hotel, you expect the technology to be at least as good as what you have at home, and if it's not, that's disappointing. By the time that shows up in your online reviews, you're way behind the curve."

In a feature for *The New York Times* in July, freelance journalist Amy Tara Koch bemoaned the unrelenting advance of in-room hotel technology, saying it threatened to ruin her guest experience. On recent trips, motorized drapes, voice-activated

lights, smart mirrors in the bathroom, and QR codes on the smart TV all required some time to get used to or failed to work, she said.

Speaking with *Today's Hotelier*, she reiterated that new hotel technology often feels unnecessary at best and burdensome at worst.

"I think a lot of hotel brands feel they have to be perceived as modern, contemporary, and cool by implementing all of this technology like chatbots, smart TVs, and apps, but the truth is it's confusing to people, especially leisure travelers," Koch said. "People want to relax in their hotel room, and there seems to be a learning curve for every single piece of technology in the room."

At a hotel in Athens, for example, a wall-mounted digital display offered several kinds of lighting, including "sexy lighting," Koch said.

"You had a bunch of options to choose from, but most of the people I interviewed for my story just wanted the lights on or off," she said. "They don't want a nightlight or mood lighting."

For her article, Koch interviewed Neha Jaitpal, the global general manager for Honeywell's Building Technologies division, which provides tech solutions for more than two million hotel rooms worldwide. Jaitpal said automation is allowing hotels to cater to guests' individual preferences without the need for human interaction.

As an example, Jaitpal said guests now can arrive at their hotel rooms to find the temperature, lighting, and television programming set precisely how they want. But if that requires guests to sync their smartphones to every device in the room by Bluetooth, Koch said she'll pass.

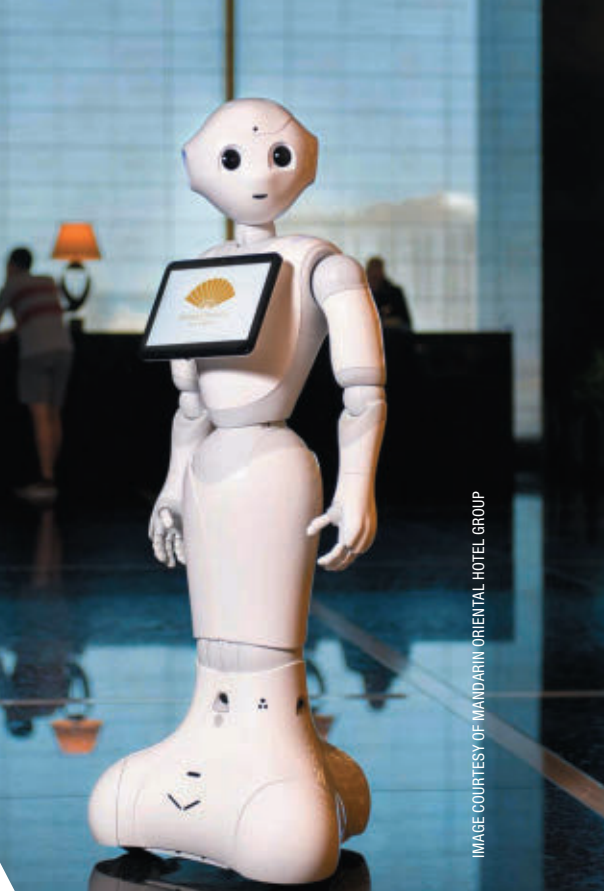


IMAGE COURTESY OF MANDARIN ORIENTAL HOTEL GROUP

Pepper, the four-foot-tall humanoid robot, can answer guest questions and never gets frustrated with the same queries.

"Maybe it's a generational thing, but I don't need to turn everything on and off with my phone," she said.

Similarly, Koch expressed frustration with hotel chatbots that are designed to replace human concierges. Through text messaging or smartphone apps, chatbots can be used to request car services, make restaurant reservations or spa appointments, send maintenance requests, obtain information about hotel amenities, request fresh towels and toiletries, or get recommendations for nearby attractions.

But unless guests' requests are simple and generic, chatbots' responses may not be helpful, Koch said. Ask a hotel chatbot about the best local restaurants, and it likely will provide the same list to all guests, regardless of their demographics and preferences, she said.

In contrast, Koch said she recently asked a concierge at a Paris hotel to recommend a quiet bar that wouldn't be flooded with tourists, and he knew the perfect place.

"He took the time to listen to me, and his expertise really benefited me," Koch said. "You can't get that from an app. It seems

to be the default for hotels to tell you to download their app, and I find that frustrating. Sometimes I want real, genuine, old-fashioned customer service.”

TIME KEEPS ON TICKIN’

UNLV’s Erdem, a content advisor for Hospitality Technology magazine, said check-in kiosks have gained widespread adoption at Las Vegas hotels, and some properties, such as Park MGM, have removed their front desks entirely. At those properties, so-called lobby ambassadors are available to help guests who struggle to use the self-service kiosks, but the total headcount has been reduced, he said.

In guest rooms, more functions are being moved onto smart TVs, smart mirrors, and other digital displays, Erdem said. Guests can order room service, chat with the front desk, request items, open the curtains, turn off the lights, and control the TV using these devices, which now frequently offer touchscreen functionality instead of a remote control with buttons to push, he added.

Looking ahead, Erdem said several companies are exploring ways to use smartphone data to drive revenue and improve the guest experience. When a customer

accesses the hotel’s Wi-Fi, an AI program will track his phone’s location throughout the property, noting whether he spends a lot of time at the Starbucks, the restaurant, or the spa.

Using that data, hotels will be able to offer promotions tailored to individual customers, steering them back toward their favorite amenities or incentivizing them to try new ones, Erdem said. AI will make it easier for hotels to gauge the effectiveness of their promotions by automating the tracking of coupons and offers to determine usage rates.

“They know where that particular device that’s associated with you is on their property, which gives them more data points to work with,” he said. “The more information you have on your guests, the more customized you can make it for them, especially when they return the next time.”

AI also will improve security at hotel properties, Erdem said. Several AI companies are researching how to use

facial-recognition and behavioral cues to determine a person’s mood, which could help hotels and casinos to identify potential threats. In addition, companies are exploring how AI can monitor many surveillance cameras at once, searching for suspicious behavior much more efficiently than human security professionals.

In time, AI-powered surveillance systems will be able to identify emergencies, such as when a fight breaks out or a guest falls to the ground due to a health event and will automatically send an alert to security guards. AI could even help hotels to identify signs of human trafficking based on movement on the property.

“In terms of safety and security, AI has a lot of positive implications,” Erdem said. ■

BEST PRACTICES FOR IMPLEMENTATION

Thanks to technology, hotels and other businesses now have more information about their customers than ever before, but that’s not always a good thing. The recent high-profile cyberattacks on Caesars and MGM Resorts exposed the personal data of thousands of hotel guests enrolled in those companies’ loyalty programs, resulting in several class-action lawsuits.

In MGM’s case, hackers found an employee on LinkedIn to impersonate, called the hotel company’s service desk and were able to gain access to that employee’s account. Hackers used a similar social-engineering strategy on an IT vendor to breach Caesars.

Those cases illustrate the importance of thoroughly vetting technology providers and ensuring they have good cybersecurity measures in place, according to Andrew Huzyk, principal at Skyland Technology Consulting Inc. and a consultant with Cayuga Hospitality Consultants.

Reservation systems and mobile applications have access to sensitive guest data, and middleware platforms are optimizing the guest experience by integrating various hotel systems together, Huzyk said. “You want to be sure vendors have taken all the right precautions and they’re complying with data security standards,” he added.

Whenever possible, tech upgrades should be tested before being rolled out to the entire property, Huzyk said. That could mean

installing smart TVs in only a few rooms and closely monitoring guest feedback before deciding whether to put one in every room, for example. It also might mean testing out a robot butler on a single floor at first.

Hotel employees also will need training whenever new technology is introduced, according to Dr. Mehmet Erdem, professor of hotel operations and technology at UNLV’s William F. Harrah College of Hospitality.

Workers must be comfortable helping guests to operate new technology, and they must understand how tech upgrades impact their own workflows. Erdem pointed to the simple example of training housekeeping staff to make sure smart speakers haven’t been stolen whenever they clean a room. If they don’t do that every time, the hotelier won’t know which guest to charge for their replacement, he said.

“You have to review your existing procedures whenever technology is introduced into the ecosystem where the employee works so they know what’s expected of them,” Erdem said. “As you deploy different types of guest-facing technologies, you need smooth integration at the back end.”

Help wanted

Staffing, labor shortages, retaining quality team members, and technology's part in the hiring process

by STEPHANIE LEGER

Sales Reps Wanted
Self Starter with 3 Yr. Sales Exp. Necessary! Must have commercial experience with the ability to...

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WITH WORKFORCE SHORTAGES CONTINUING TO BE A PROBLEM in the industry, we're devoting considerable time and energy in this issue to discussing multiple facets of hospitality employment. In this three-part article, we're exploring best practices for hiring, training, and keeping qualified team members, while also covering AI's role in recruiting top talent.

MEGA PIXEL/SHUTTERSTOCK.COM, HERE/SHUTTERSTOCK.COM, ANDREY_POPOV/SHUTTERSTOCK.COM

Part I:

Leveraging AI in recruitment and training for inclusivity and efficiency in the hospitality industry



“Recruiters and trainers who fully understand job roles, maintain open communication with department leaders, and immerse themselves in the operational aspects of the hotel are better equipped to build a skilled and cohesive workforce.”

IN TODAY'S RAPIDLY EVOLVING hospitality industry, the effective recruitment and training of employees are essential for delivering excellent guest experiences. With the advent of artificial intelligence, hotels have the opportunity to streamline their processes, enhance inclusivity, and provide a seamless candidate experience.

INCLUSIVITY IN RECRUITMENT

One of the challenges faced by hotels in regards to recruitment technology is ensuring the recruitment process is inclusive for all candidates. Not all potential employees have access to computers to create polished resumes or fully understand complex

questionnaires. AI can be a valuable ally in overcoming these hurdles.

AI-enhanced résumé creation: For candidates who lack computer access or are unfamiliar with résumé formatting, AI-powered tools can help simplify the process. These tools can guide candidates in creating résumés, suggesting improvements and tailoring the content to suit the specific position based upon the job description. This feature ensures applicants from various backgrounds can present their skills and experiences effectively.

Accessible questionnaires: When using AI in questionnaires and assessments, hotels should focus on making them user-friendly. These tools can be designed to provide simplified, jargon-free instructions and support to applicants who may struggle with complex language or technical terminology. Additionally, voice-recognition software can enable applicants to complete questionnaires verbally, catering to diverse abilities and backgrounds.

Hotels can make these tools available on their websites to assist potential employees.

OPTIMIZING RÉSUMÉS WITH AI KEYWORDS

In a highly competitive job market, having a resume that stands out is crucial. AI can assist hotels in identifying the most relevant keywords to include on applicants' resumes, ensuring their qualifications align with the job requirements. This not only simplifies the screening process but also increases the chances of matching the right candidate with the right position.

AI-driven keyword analysis: AI can analyze job descriptions and identify keywords

commonly associated with specific roles. This analysis assists applicants in tailoring their résumés to include these keywords, increasing the likelihood of their résumés being shortlisted for consideration.

TRANSPARENT COMMUNICATION

One of the most common complaints from job applicants is the lack of communication during the recruitment process. Hotels can use AI to address this issue by automating communication at different stages of the hiring process, ensuring applicants always are in the loop.

Automated acknowledgments: AI can be employed to send immediate acknowledgments to applicants once they've submitted their applications. These automated responses reassure candidates their application has been received and is under review. This step alone can significantly improve the candidate's experience.

Status updates: As the recruitment process progresses, AI can provide regular status updates to candidates. Whether it's notifying them they've moved to the next round of the selection process or informing them the position has been filled, this level of transparency reduces uncertainty and anxiety for applicants.

Feedback mechanisms: AI-driven feedback tools can provide constructive feedback to candidates who didn't make it to the next round. Constructive criticism can help applicants improve and potentially be successful in future job applications. This step is a valuable part of nurturing a positive employer brand.

PERSONALIZED LEARNING

By embracing AI in training, hotels can provide more efficient, consistent, and personalized learning experiences for their employees, ultimately resulting in enhanced service quality and guest satisfaction.

Tailor learning: AI can tailor training modules to individual employees' strengths and weaknesses. By analyzing their performance and preferences, AI can provide personalized learning paths, ensuring each employee receives the training they need to excel in their specific roles.



AI can help hotels achieve this goal efficiently and effectively while also addressing common pain points for both recruiters and applicants.”

Cost savings: Automating training processes with AI can lead to significant cost savings. Hotels can reduce the need for physical training materials and manual trainers, while also minimizing the time spent off the job for employees.

SEARCHING AI TOOLS

Hotels can discover AI tools through a systematic approach. Many AI tools are available on online marketplaces or directories. You can search for AI solutions on platforms like Capterra, G2 Crowd, or Hotel Tech Report. Visit the websites of AI vendors that specialize in hospitality solutions. They often provide detailed information about their products, case studies, and customer reviews.

Once you identify potential AI tools, reach out to the vendors and request demos or trials. This allows you to see how the tools work and evaluate their suitability for your hotel. Ask the vendors for

references or case studies from other hotels that have used their AI tools. Talking to existing customers can provide valuable insights into the effectiveness and reliability of the tool. Be sure to check with your IT Department if the AI tool can integrate with your existing hotel management systems and technology stack. Seamless integration is crucial for maximizing the tool's effectiveness. Ensure the AI tool complies with data privacy and security regulations, especially if it involves handling guest data.

In a sector as dynamic and people-centric as hospitality, ensuring the right people are in the right roles is essential. AI can help hotels achieve this goal efficiently and effectively while also addressing common pain points for both recruiters and applicants. Embracing AI isn't just a step toward the future; it's a commitment to providing an exceptional candidate experience and ensuring the continued success of the hospitality industry.



Part II:

The importance of real-life experience in a hotel when recruiting and training.

HOSPITALITY IS A COMPLEX, dynamic field that relies on the talent and expertise of its employees to deliver exceptional guest experiences. Inside the hotel, understanding job roles is paramount when recruiting and training employees. Whether you're hiring new talent or promoting existing employees, deep knowledge of the positions within your hotel is essential. Recruiters and trainers should be intimately familiar with the responsibilities, challenges, and expectations of each job role.

A recruiter or trainer who comprehends the intricacies of these roles in a hotel can make more informed decisions, select the right candidates, and design effective training programs. Real-life experience in these roles provides valuable insights into the specific skills and competencies required to excel, making the hiring and training process more efficient.

OPEN COMMUNICATION WITH DEPARTMENT LEADERS

Effective communication between recruiters, trainers, and department leaders is crucial for ensuring candidates and employees are well-prepared for their roles. Department leaders play a pivotal role in setting expectations for the ideal candidates, helping recruiters identify the qualities and skills necessary for success.

Additionally, department leaders can provide valuable input on training topics. They can pinpoint the technical and emotional aspects that are most relevant to their department's daily operations. Open dialogue and collaboration between HR, training, and department heads create

a cohesive approach to recruitment and training that aligns with the hotel's overall goals.

UNDERSTANDING INTERDEPARTMENTAL DYNAMICS

In a hotel, various departments must work seamlessly together to provide guests with an exceptional experience. For example, the front desk and housekeeping departments collaborate closely to ensure rooms are ready for new arrivals and guest check-ins are smooth. Understanding these interdepartmental dynamics is critical for recruiters and trainers.

Recruiters should seek candidates who not only excel in their specific roles but also can work well in a team. Likewise, trainers must educate employees on the importance of cross-departmental cooperation, highlighting how each department's contributions impact the overall guest experience. Real-life experience in multiple departments provides a holistic view of how the hotel functions as a whole.



“

Recruiters and trainers who fully understand job roles, maintain open communication with department leaders, and immerse themselves in the operational aspects of the hotel are better equipped to build a skilled and cohesive workforce.”

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REDUCED TURNOVER RATES

Many establishments often fall into the trap of hastily filling positions with warm bodies, only to later realize the individuals aren't the right fit. This can lead to high turnover rates, which are both costly and disruptive to hotel operations. One of the root causes of this issue is a lack of emphasis on providing a strong foundation during the onboarding and interview process. When recruiters and trainers prioritize real-life experience, they're better equipped to set the stage for long-term employee retention.

Candidates who receive detailed information during the interview process are better positioned to make informed decisions about the role and the hotel's expectations. Recruiters who can provide a comprehensive understanding of the daily expectations, the work environment, and the hotel's culture during interviews are more likely to attract candidates who align with these expectations. This alignment reduces the likelihood of mismatched expectations, which can lead to dissatisfaction and, ultimately, employee turnover.

THE VALUE OF IMMERSION

To truly understand the complexities and nuances of the hotel industry, recruiters and trainers should immerse themselves in the environment. This means spending time in different departments, attending department meetings, and actively engaging with employees.

Walking the floors instead of conducting recruitment and training from behind a desk offers invaluable insights. It allows recruiters and trainers to experience firsthand the daily challenges and triumphs of employees. This immersive approach builds trust and credibility, as employees appreciate leaders who invest time and effort to understand their roles.

Recruiters and trainers who embrace immersion often discover new opportunities for improvement and innovation. They can identify areas where training is most needed and where potential candidates may lack necessary skills. This firsthand experience also can lead to the development of more effective and relevant training programs.

PRIORITIZING REAL-LIFE EXPERIENCE

In the hotel industry, the importance of real-life experience when recruiting and training employees cannot be overstated. Recruiters and trainers who fully understand job roles, maintain open communication with department leaders, and immerse themselves in the operational aspects of the hotel are better equipped to build a skilled and cohesive workforce.

Hotels can hire and train employees who are not only competent in their specific roles but also adept at working together to deliver exceptional guest experiences. This approach leads to increased guest satisfaction, employee engagement, and ultimately, the success of the hotel. In an industry where the quality of service is paramount, recruiting and training from a place of firsthand experience is the key to excellence.

Part III:

Boost your hotel employee engagement this year. 20 unique ways to move past pizza parties.

EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT IS CRUCIAL FOR THE SUCCESS OF ANY business, especially in the hospitality industry. Happy and engaged employees provide better service, increase guest satisfaction, and ultimately improve a hotel's bottom line. While pizza parties and other traditional methods have their place, it's time to think outside the box and explore new ways to boost employee engagement in your hotel.

Here are 20 unique ideas to revitalize your workforce:

- 1. Peer recognition programs:** Encourage employees to recognize and celebrate each other's accomplishments. Implement a system where team members can nominate their peers for a job well done. Recognized employees could receive special perks or rewards.
- 2. Mentorship and buddy systems:** Pair experienced employees with new hires. This not only helps new employees integrate quickly but also fosters a sense of belonging and support within the team.
- 3. Wellness challenges:** Promote physical and mental well-being through friendly competitions. Consider step-count challenges, meditation sessions, or healthy eating contests. Offer prizes to those who achieve their wellness goals.
- 4. Employee-led learning sessions:** Let employees share their knowledge and interests with their colleagues. Whether it's a language class, a cooking demonstration, or a fitness workshop, this can build a sense of community and mutual growth.



5. Innovation workshops: Set aside time for employees to brainstorm and present innovative ideas for the hotel. Encourage them to think about ways to enhance the guest experience, improve efficiency, or save costs. Reward the best ideas.

6. A field day extravaganza: Host a “Hotel Olympics” field day event that combines team-building activities with a competitive spirit. Divide your employees into teams, and let the games begin. This event not only is fun but also promotes teamwork and healthy competition.

7. Personalized training paths: Recognize that each employee has unique career goals. Develop personalized training plans for employees to help them reach their career aspirations within the hotel. This approach shows your commitment to their growth.

8. Community engagement initiatives: Organize volunteer opportunities for your team to give back to the local community. This not only fosters a sense of purpose but also strengthens the hotel’s ties with its surroundings.

9. Storytelling sessions: Invite employees to share their personal stories and experiences, both inside and outside of work. This can help build empathy and connections among the team members.

10. Vendor-sponsored employee appreciation parties: Collaborate with your vendors and partners to sponsor unique employee appreciation parties. These parties should be designed to recognize and celebrate your employees’ hard work and dedication while connecting with the suppliers.

11. Employee-designed spaces: Allow employees to have a say in how their workspaces look and feel. When they have a sense of ownership over their environment, they’re more likely to feel engaged and comfortable.

12. Creativity workshops: Organize regular workshops that encourage employees to explore their creative side. This can include activities like painting, sculpture, or even music. Fostering creativity can enhance problem-solving skills and overall job satisfaction.

13. Inter-hotel exchange program: Create an inter-hotel exchange program where employees visit and work at other hotels within the same hotel group or network. This allows them to gain exposure to different operational methods, cultures, and guest service approaches.

14. Employee of the month alternatives: Move beyond the standard employee of the month award and consider recognizing employees for specific achievements like most innovative ideas, best customer feedback, or the most positive attitude.

15. Sustainability initiatives: Involve your employees in green initiatives. Encourage them to come up with ways to reduce the hotel’s environmental footprint. This not only engages them in meaningful work but also aligns with global sustainability trends.

16. Job rotation programs: Implement job rotation opportunities for employees, allowing them to gain experience in various roles. This can keep their work fresh and interesting while enhancing their overall skill set.

17. Personal development stipends: Offer financial support for employees to pursue courses or activities that contribute to their personal growth and development, both inside and outside of work.

18. Diversity and inclusion workshops: Create workshops and training sessions that promote diversity and inclusion within your workforce. Encourage open discussions and the sharing of experiences to foster a more inclusive workplace.

19. Peer support networks: Establish support groups where employees can discuss common challenges and seek advice from their peers. This creates a strong support system within the hotel.

20. Professional development days: Set aside dedicated days for employees to focus on their professional development. This can include attending industry conferences, taking online courses, or engaging in networking opportunities.

Moving beyond the typical pizza parties and standard employee engagement activities can make a significant difference in the morale and productivity of your hotel employees. These innovative ideas can help create a more engaged and motivated workforce, which, in turn, will have a positive impact on guest satisfaction and the overall success of your hotel. Remember, the key to successful employee engagement is to foster a sense of belonging, personal growth, and a shared purpose. ■



Stephanie Leger is Chief Excellence Officer of First Rate Hospitality, a hospitality training consultancy. Stephanie has trained more than 20,000 hospitality employees in hotel and restaurant operations worldwide, providing countless reviews of operational evaluations. She has nearly 20 years of experience in the hotel industry globally, working with brands such as Ritz-Carlton, Mandarin Oriental, Forbes Travel Guide Inspector, AAA, and others. Stephanie is also the co-host of the popular WTF “Walk The Floors” hospitality training podcast. For more information, please visit www.firstratehospitality.com.

Looking ahead

Exploring the industry's future with the AAHOA Board of Directors

by EVELYN HOOVER

IN THIS EDITION, WE BRING YOU EXCLUSIVE INSIGHTS INTO THE ACCOMPLISHMENTS and perspectives of the distinguished members of the AAHOA Board of Directors. From the historic success of AAHOACON23 to their impactful collaborations with state leaders, each Board Member showcases the dedication and resilience that characterize their commitment to advancing the interests of both AAHOA Members and the industry they passionately serve. We invite you to gain a deeper understanding of the dynamic hospitality landscape through the eyes of AAHOA's influential leaders.

Bharat Patel AAHOA Chairman

In my relentless dedication to the AAHOA Political Action Committee fundraising, I've witnessed a remarkable surge this year, with our passionate members contributing half a million dollars – the highest since 2019. Notably, Florida has emerged as a standout contributor, leading all regions in PAC contributions. What truly sets this milestone apart is the unity demonstrated by every member of the Board of Directors, symbolizing a collective commitment to shaping the future of the industry. As the AAHOA PAC expands, so does our capacity to advocate effectively on behalf of America's hotel owners. By cultivating strong relationships with policymakers, we position ourselves to champion the interests of hotel owners and advocate for policies that foster a thriving business environment. This commitment extends beyond individual contributions; it embodies a shared belief in the significance of our industry's voice in the halls of power.



Miraj S. Patel AAHOA Vice Chairman

I am truly honored to have attended numerous AAHOA events, spanning not only my home state of Texas but also the entire U.S. Each event serves as a powerful reminder of the cohesive strength within the AAHOA community and the extraordinary platform we have built. It is a platform that empowers America's hotel owners, providing them with the essential resources to thrive as entrepreneurs. These events showcase the innovative products and services of exhibitors, propelling hotel businesses to the next level. Equally significant are the enduring partnerships with influential organizations such as the Texas Hotel & Lodging Association and the launch of HYPE Ownership, a forward-thinking initiative to empower the industry's young professionals. I take great pride in contributing to an organization that consistently elevates itself, fostering a culture of excellence and innovation in hospitality.



Kamalesh (KP) Patel AAHOA Treasurer

As the Treasurer of the AAHOA Board of Directors, I've worked tirelessly to ensure the fiscal health and stability of AAHOA, fostering an environment conducive to growth and impactful initiatives. It's also been rewarding to connect with hundreds of AAHOA Members at regional events, charity golf tournaments, advocacy events, AAHOACON, HerOwnership Conference & Retreat, and more. Meeting them face-to-face has been an enriching experience, providing valuable insights into the diverse challenges and successes within our dynamic membership. It is an honor to be part of an organization where financial acumen meets the passion of dedicated individuals. It is what makes these events and initiatives possible. I look forward to continuing this collaborative journey, advancing both the fiscal health of AAHOA and the dreams of our resilient and enterprising 20,000 members.



Rahul Patel AAHOA Secretary

Florida hotel owners must always be prepared and have a plan in place during hurricane season. When Hurricane Ian made landfall in 2022, AAHOA took proactive measures to ensure Florida hoteliers were well-informed about the storm's dangers and directed them to available resources. Shortly after the hurricane, AAHOA Chairman Bharat Patel and I scheduled a Town Hall with U.S. Congressman Byron Donalds (FLR-19) and numerous local AAHOA Members to discuss the ongoing recovery from Hurricane Ian's ruinous effects on their communities. AAHOA is a collective voice. Because of AAHOA, we were already in communication with [Florida Attorney General] Ashley Moody's office, and we were already in touch with the governor's office. In Florida, AAHOA has strong relationships with the local and state levels of government. This robust network has proven to be instrumental, enabling us to swiftly navigate challenges, coordinate relief efforts, and serve as an unmatched resource for hotel owners during times of crisis.



Sanjay M. Patel Alabama Regional Director

Can you share some examples of successful collaborations between AAHOA and state leaders in your regions?

In September 2023, AAHOA Member Viral Patel and I had the opportunity to meet with Senator Katie Britt in Tuscaloosa, AL, to discuss critical economic issues at the national and state levels. The meeting touched upon the Department of Labor's proposed overtime rule and its potential impact on hotel businesses. Senator Katie Britt has a demonstrated history of support for AAHOA. More than two years ago, she attended an AAHOA women's event in Birmingham, driven by a phone call from a local Ambassador. During that event, Senator Britt spent more than an hour with AAHOA women hoteliers, engaging in meaningful conversations about her vision for supporting Alabama businesses.



Naresh (ND) Bhakta Greater Los Angeles Area Regional Director

What has been your most significant achievement as an AAHOA board member in 2023?

I was proud to address the Los Angeles City Council on various issues detrimental to the hospitality industry, including proposals to move unsheltered residents into hotels, rising wages, police department aggression, and more. We also enjoyed numerous networking opportunities with lawmakers regarding issues surrounding local unions and city ordinances.





Vimal Patel
Gulf Regional Director

What has been your most significant achievement as an AAHOA board member in 2023?

I helped create the AAHOA Charitable Foundation, which will support disaster relief and charitable initiatives across the country. AAHOA Members already contribute to their communities by support-

ing charitable organizations that provide services ranging from education and disease research funding to humanitarian efforts. Thanks to the generosity of vendor partners, members, and sponsors, AAHOA has been able to donate millions of dollars to charities that touch lives and make the world a better place. AAHOA adopted the Foundation and will give all members a new outlet to continue supporting communities.



Harikrishna (HK) Patel
Mid South Regional Director

What has been your most significant achievement as an AAHOA board member in 2023?

As an AAHOA Board Member in 2023, one of my most significant achievements was successfully visiting every region for the regional meetings. During these visits, I had the opportunity to meet with our membership and engage in discussions about the day-to-day challenges they face in their businesses. By actively listening to their concerns, I was able to find effective solutions. Additionally, as the chair of the E-Commerce Committee, I collaborated with the committee members to implement various strategies tailored to benefit our independent and branded hotel members. We are excited to roll out these initiatives in the coming months.



Pinkesh Patel
North Carolina Regional Director

What advice or insights would you offer AAHOA members looking to take up a volunteer leadership role to help them make the most of their experience and contribute effectively to the association's mission?

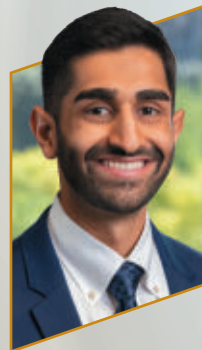
If you're capable of running your business successfully, and if you have a passion for helping others to become successful businesspeople, that means you're a leader already and should join AAHOA to further your journey and broaden your leadership skills.



Ankit Panchal
North Pacific Regional Director

Are there any unique strategies or programs you've implemented or plan to implement to address labor challenges and ensure exceptional service quality in your hotels?

I was able to attract more applicants by offering daily pay. We partnered with a payroll company that allows employees to get pay advances daily after they clock out. Also, we signed up with a virtual in-room tip technology company, allowing consumers to use electronic payments to tip the staff, creating motivation to provide exceptional service. These initiatives have been very successful for us.



Dhiren Masters
North Texas Regional Director

What has been your most significant achievement as an AAHOA board member in 2023?

I'm proud to have built greater transparency by hosting more back-of-the-house tours for our members to speak to Congressional reps about key issues occurring in our industry.

What is the one word that you think will summarize the hotel industry in 2024 and why?

Perseverance, as the industry will come out stronger from the down market.



Taran Patel
Northwest Regional
Director

What has been your most significant achievement as an AAHOA board member in 2023?

We've had quite a few momentous moments in the Pacific Northwest in the past year, including establishing a partnership with the Washington Hospitality Association, where AAHOA will have a designated seat at the table. Another highlight would be successfully testifying to the Portland City Council to stop the removal of a cap on the Transient Accommodation Tax. This would have been another blow to a market where our members are still recovering post-pandemic. Our members also successfully testified and stopped a measure in Seattle, WA, where there was an attempt to increase the minimum wage in King County to \$20.65/hr starting in 2025.



Mike Riverside
South Pacific Regional
Director

What has been your most significant achievement as an AAHOA board member in 2023?

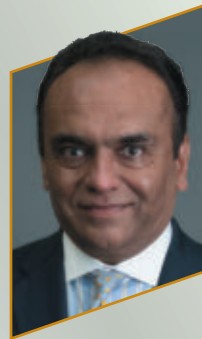
The most significant achievement I've had as an AAHOA Board Member was to introduce a change to governing documents that stated that Eastern and Western Director at Large positions be only voted on by members of that region. This gives more voice to the members of that region in selecting who represents them on the Board. Voting is an important aspect of being a member of any association and integrity in voting helps all achieve favorable results in the end.



Dharmesh Ahir
Southwest
Regional Director

What has been your most significant achievement as an AAHOA board member in 2023?

Being a part of the Government Affairs Committee, we were able to make the necessary changes to make our PAC funds more accountable. Now when we give PAC funds to an elected official, the regional director is now responsible to give it to the elected official. Prior, the AAHOA DC team would give the funds directly.



Kalpesh Joshi
Upper Midwest
Regional Director

What do you anticipate will be the most significant challenge facing hoteliers in 2024?

Insurance and labor will be the key challenges. AAHOA is working to get a combined insurance rate, which may help us continue to work with existing team members and make them feel comfortable.



Deepak Patel
Washington DC Area
Regional Director

Can you share some examples of successful collaborations between aahoa and state associations in your regions? How have these partnerships contributed to the success of your events and advocacy efforts?

While AAHOA is advocating at federal level, it's extremely important to stay informed and take action quickly at the state level since many regulations change at this level. Partnerships with state associations are crucial and play an important role in helping AAHOA Members.



Pinal Patel
Director at Large
Eastern Division

Can you share some examples of successful collaborations between AAHOA and state associations in your region?

Partnering with TNHospitality opened doors to a wider network of professionals within the hospitality and tourism sectors in Tennessee. This collaboration has facilitated joint networking events, conferences, and trade shows, fostering connections between AAHOA Members and other industry stakeholders in the state.



Nalin (Neil) Patel

Director at Large
Western Division

What has been your most significant achievement as an AAHOA board member in 2023?

We have held strong in the face of adversity. There was pressure from brands to give up on the path for the voice of our members to be heard but continued to work toward equal partnership.



Tanmay Patel

Young Professional
Director Western
Division

Can you share some examples of successful collaborations between AAHOA and state associations in your regions? How have these

partnerships contributed to the success of your events and advocacy efforts?

THLA, along with AAHOA, has a 100% record for legislation relating to the hospitality industry. I don't think anything else needs to be said.



Dylan Patel

Young Professional
Director Eastern
Division

What do you anticipate will be the most significant challenge facing hoteliers in 2024?

Financing capabilities and loan maturities. Financing has been tremendously difficult for hoteliers with lender appetite for hotel loans decreasing. Asset values can no longer be priced at previous levels due to properties not being able to meet their Debt Service Coverage Ratios at current mortgage rates thus causing a huge spread between a seller's asking price and the price at which the buyer is able to finance the deal. Many hoteliers will be faced with the challenge of their loans maturing in 2024 as well. It will be a tough decision to make on whether they should refinance with rates more than double their current rates or if they should sell the asset.



Once you start focusing on taking care of your existing team members first, you'll have employees from competing hotels knocking on your door seeking opportunities. A happy team translates to a better guest experience."

- Taran Patel, Northwest Regional Director



Purnima Patel

Women Hoteliers
Director Eastern Division

What has been your most significant achievement as an AAHOA board member in 2023?

The most successful achievement has been the HerOwnership Conference & Retreat, which was a huge success. I was honored to be in attendance and see women in the industry get together to network together and attend two successful masterclasses at this conference. Also, attending AAHOA's advocacy efforts in D.C. where we got to meet and greet our local leaders on some issues our industry is facing.



Abraham Tieh

Industry Partner

What do you anticipate will be the most significant challenge facing hoteliers in 2024?

Lately, the biggest concern for hotel owners is that it's increasingly difficult to get a refinancing loan when a loan is maturing. Due to high mortgage rates, hotels are operating with a smaller margin and some of them may not be qualified for a new loan. Hoteliers may be forced to choose between a lower loan ratio, or simply walk away. We're seeing hotel foreclosures are on the upswing. ■

A year full of Wins

Charting AAHOA's 2023 advocacy successes

by TEAM AAHOA

1 A YEAR MARKED BY RELENTLESS DEDICATION

and strategic advocacy efforts, AAHOA achieved significant milestones in 2023. With a membership base of 20,000 strong, and made up of diverse generations of family businesses, AAHOA has emerged as a powerful force for change within the industry. Here, we delve into some of the association's advocacy milestones, from the national stage to local calls to action in 2023. These advocacy wins are some of the ways AAHOA has and will continue to reshape hospitality in the new year.

1 ATTENDED HISTORIC STATE VISIT OF INDIAN PRIME MINISTER NARENDRA MODI

AAHOA Chairman Bharat Patel, Vice Chairman Miraj S. Patel, Treasurer Kamalesh (KP) Patel, Secretary Rahul Patel, and Immediate Past Chair Nishant (Neal) Patel represented AAHOA's 20,000 Members as guests at the White House South Lawn welcome ceremony and Prime Minister Modi's joint address to Congress. AAHOA leaders were honored to represent one of the most important industries to the Indian American community and our nation's economy.



[L-R] AAHOA Treasurer Kamalesh (KP) Patel, Chairman Bharat Patel, Secretary Rahul Patel, and Immediate Past Chairman Nishant (Neal) Patel attended the historic state visit of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

2 AAHOA HOSTS U.S. PRESIDENTIAL CONTENDER VIVEK RAMASWAMY FOR INDUSTRY FORUM

U.S. Presidential candidate Vivek Ramaswamy participated in the first AAHOA 2024 Presidential Candidate Forum. The exclusive interview with Ramaswamy was an opportunity for AAHOA to speak on behalf of the industry with a key Presidential candidate about the issues affecting the tourism and hospitality industry, and America's small business owners.



AAHOA Chairman Bharat Patel interviews U.S. Presidential candidate Vivek Ramaswamy.

3 AAHOA ATTENDS DIWALI CELEBRATION AT VP'S RESIDENCE IN WASHINGTON

AAHOA Chairman Bharat Patel had the distinct honor of attending a Diwali celebration at the U.S. Vice President Kamala Harris' Residence in Washington, D.C., on Wednesday, November 8, 2023, on behalf of AAHOA. This extraordinary event was co-hosted by Vice President Harris and Second Gentleman Douglas Emhoff in collaboration with Indian American Impact. It provided a unique platform to shine a light on Diwali's cultural and spiritual significance, drawing attention to the rich tapestry of traditions that make it such a cherished holiday for countless Americans and individuals around the world.



AAHOA Chairman Bharat Patel with Maryland Lt. Governor Aruna Miller at Vice President Kamala Harris' Diwali celebration.

4

HALF A MILLION PAC IMPACT

AAHOA Members made more than \$500,000 in Political Action Committee contributions in 2023, which is the most since 2019. These substantial PAC contributions serve as a testament to the unity and impact members can achieve when working together toward shared goals.



AAHOA Members testified in support of NJ AB 1958.

5

MAKING THE VOICE OF AMERICA'S HOTEL OWNERS HEARD

Last year, AAHOA held state advocacy events at capitals nationwide, conducted hundreds of meetings with public officials, and saw AAHOA Members travel to Washington, D.C., for AAHOA's 2023 Spring National Advocacy Conference and 2023 Fall National Advocacy Conference. Both advocacy conferences featured elected officials and industry leaders as keynote speakers, invited lawmakers to successful evening receptions, and convened productive meetings. While at the Capitol this past fall, AAHOA Members were able to watch the swearing-in of the new Speaker of the House of Representatives, Mike Johnson, from their seat in the House Gallery.

Additionally, AAHOA worked tirelessly to advocate for fair franchising, ensure a level playing field where competition can thrive, secure GSA per diem funding from \$98 to \$107, promote access to capital, champion a competitive market for credit card "swipe" fees, co-sponsor the *Essential Workers for Economic Advancement Act*, address the hospitality labor shortage with H-2B visas, and more.



AAHOA Members at the AAHOA 2023 Fall National Advocacy Conference.

AAHOA MEMBERS TESTIFY IN SUPPORT OF NEW JERSEY BILL ADVANCING FAIR FRANCHISING PRINCIPLES

Last year, as the largest hotel owners association, representing the exclusive interests of America's hotel owners, AAHOA showed up in New Jersey to testify in support of amendments to New Jersey Assembly Bill 1958 to improve the franchise model. The Assembly Commerce and Economic Development Committee reported the bill out of Committee with amendments in March 2023. Six members voted yes, zero members voted no, and three members abstained. About 30 AAHOA Members attended the hearing and several offered testimony.

BRINGING THE INDUSTRY TOGETHER

8

AAHOA welcomed nearly 5,000 hoteliers to 25 Regional Conferences & Trade Shows last year. By bringing together hoteliers from across the U.S., AAHOA reinforces its position as a cornerstone for collaboration, education, and empowerment. Many state and local officials attended these regional events across the nation, including Gov. Sarah Huckabee Sanders (AR), Lt. Gov. Leslie Rutledge (AR), Lt. Governor Jaqueline Coleman (KY), Gov. Kevin Stitt (OK), Gov. Tony Evers (WI), Atty. Gen. Rob Bonta (CA), and many others.

DEPARTMENT OF LABOR PROPOSED RULE

In November 2023, AAHOA submitted comments to the U.S. Department of Labor regarding the proposed rule to raise the overtime salary exemption threshold for executive, administrative, and professional employees under the *Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA)*. AAHOA's comprehensive feedback aims to ensure a fair labor market and prevent unintended consequences for small business owners, such as independent hoteliers and franchisee members of the association.



9 PARTNERSHIPS WITH INFLUENTIAL STATE ASSOCIATIONS

AAHOA continued to strengthen relationships with state associations. AAHOA leadership and the Government Affairs team spoke at many state events, including the Washington State Hospitality Conference, Tennessee Governor's Conference on Hospitality and Tourism, Southern Lodging Summit in Memphis, and Georgia Hotel & Lodging Association's Hotel Forecast events in Atlanta and Savannah. We also testified in Los Angeles on the Responsible Hotel Ordinance, protected AAHOA hoteliers from guests who are staying over and refusing to pay, supported new regulations that enable oversight of short-term rentals, and joined the Texas Hotel & Lodging Association in applauding the overwhelming passage of Proposition 4.



AAHOA Director of State Government Affairs Western Region Rachel Stone (left) and AAHOA Member Shaiza Damji (second to left) at the Washington State Hospitality Conference.

10 NATIONAL LABOR RELATIONS BOARD (NLRB) JOINT-EMPLOYER RULE

On October 27, 2023, the NLRB issued the final ruling on the definition of joint-employer status. The ruling essentially broadens the definition to any "entity that has an employment relationship with the employees," and AAHOA and other associations recognize that this final ruling could damage the current franchise business model. AAHOA is carefully reviewing the history of the NLRB Joint Employer rule, along with the new expanded provisions. Based on this broader language, the implementation of the rule will undoubtedly be played out on a case-by-case basis, some of which could favor franchisees who are subject to their franchisors' authority to control (indirectly and/or directly) matters governing employees' essential terms and conditions of employment. AAHOA will continue to carefully monitor the path forward, and provide support to AAHOA Members as they address the meaning and impact of these changes with their franchise relationships.

RAISING THE BAR IN HUMAN TRAFFICKING AWARENESS AND PREVENTION

AAHOA is actively addressing the critical issue of human trafficking within the industry. With more than 1,500 lawsuits filed against hotel owners and chains in the past year alone, there's a national imperative to address human trafficking. AAHOA is taking a proactive approach by ensuring that all its members and their staff have opportunities for comprehensive training through the BEST Inhospitable to Human Trafficking Training Sponsored by AAHOA. Additionally, the AAHOA Government Affairs Team is diligently working on a 50-state memo, which will be a valuable resource for hoteliers. This memo delves into the specifics of human trafficking lawsuits across all 50 states. Moreover, AAHOA Regional Directors have engaged in meaningful partnerships with state justice departments in California, Missouri, Arkansas, and others. These efforts showcase AAHOA's commitment to human trafficking solutions and fostering a safer and more responsible hospitality industry.



AAHOA Leadership with the GHLA Leadership team at the Georgia Hotel & Lodging Association's Hotel Forecast event in Atlanta.

The groundwork laid in 2023 serves as a solid foundation for ongoing empowerment, education, change, and collaboration in the new year. There is strength in numbers, power in a collective voice, and momentum in community. AAHOA's dedication to its members and advocacy efforts promise a future where the voice of America's hotel owners continues to resonate and drive impactful change. ■

Don't gamble the future of your business

The importance of understanding the differences between investment and speculation

by STEVE COKER and SUNIL LAD

A **SA SMALL-BUSINESS OWNER,** it can be difficult to decide where to invest your hard-earned money. Do you invest your earnings back into your small business or do you diversify, investing your cash into stocks, bonds, real estate, or other investments? Reinvesting in the small business, where the owner has control, and where cash flows are more transparent, often is a great answer, but it can bring risks. If the small business fails, the personal finances of the owner are crushed. On the other hand, investing in stocks, bonds, and real estate bring diversification benefits, but this can also feel like speculation, or even gambling, to an experienced small-business owner.

The fintech revolution introduced modern brokerage platforms that allow investors to buy and sell stocks, bonds, real estate, and alternative investments at a frightening pace. This has only reinforced the misguided notion modern investing is more of a speculative game. Navigating the landscape of financial

products and services can become quite daunting, making it difficult to differentiate between investment and speculation. Here are some investing fundamentals to stay grounded.

FUNDAMENTALS OF INVESTING

The primary goal of investing is to build wealth over time by purchasing assets that will increase in value or generate income. The key to ensuring you're investing and not speculating is based on your method of evaluating assets. Benjamin Graham defines the core principles of value investing in "The Intelligent Investor," which was first published in 1949 and is still widely considered to be one of the most influential books ever written on investing. Graham's emphasis on fundamental analysis while

leaving a "margin of safety" provides a framework for investors to evaluate an asset. One of the most successful investors of all time, Warren Buffet, was a student of Graham at Columbia Business School and has often cited him as a major influence on his investment philosophy. Considering that Buffet has applied many of these principles throughout his career and achieved unparalleled success, his recommendation holds significant weight in the investment world. On the following page, you can find a breakdown of how Graham differentiates investing and speculation.



investing

1 BASIS IN ANALYSIS

Before investing, one must analyze financial statements, assess the company's competitive position, understand the industry landscape, and evaluate the experience and track record of management. The purpose of this research is to determine if the security is undervalued relative to its actual worth. An investment should only be made after a thorough analysis of the intrinsic value of an asset. One common method used for this is a discounted cash flow analysis.

2 SAFETY OF PRINCIPAL

Minimizing risk of loss is very important. This does not mean avoiding risk entirely, but every effort should be made to reduce risk of permanent loss. By purchasing securities at a price far below their intrinsic value, one can establish a "margin of safety." This will protect your investment from potential negative events in the future that may lead to a drop in the security's price.

3 ADEQUATE RETURN

For a purchase to be considered an investment, it should offer a reasonable expectation of return. This may be derived in the form of capital appreciation, interest, or dividends. The expected return also should correlate with the level of risk associated with the security.



speculation

1 BASIS IN PRICE MOVEMENTS

Rather than focusing on intrinsic value, speculation often involves making a purchasing decision based on anticipated price movements. Short-term price fluctuations can be influenced by a variety of factors such as news, rumors, or popular ideas. Making a purchase based on these factors isn't very different from gambling.

2 PRINCIPLE AT RISK

The pursuit of higher rewards often requires taking on more risk, as well as accepting higher levels of volatility and unpredictability. Since fundamental analysis isn't required, decisions can be made too quickly. This inevitably places your capital at risk of loss.

3 POTENTIAL FOR GREATER LOSSES

By focusing on greater short-term gains, you're often positioning yourself for the possibility of greater losses. The correlation between risk and return must be considered.

4 PSYCHOLOGICAL FACTORS

Market sentiment often shifts back and forth between fear and greed. Often, speculation is heavily influenced by whatever sentiment seems to be dominant at the time. Rather than focusing on intrinsic value, trades based on market sentiment can often lead to bubbles and crashes.

WHY WE INVEST

Any investor should have a strong bias toward investing rather than speculation, but brokerage platforms, and some brokers, too often have a financial incentive to encourage trading, pushing investors to be speculators. The investor should be aware of these influences. The investor should also consider the big picture. Investing in a company also means investing in the management team – smart leaders who are focused on creating value over the long term just like the small-business owner. Yes, the markets can fluctuate wildly, but the investor can see through the day-to-day news to the underlying business model, anchored in analysis, to stay the course. ■



Steve Coker, CFP, founded Cedarstone Advisors in 2014 after more than two decades in the finance and accounting industry. Steve set out to build a firm centered on the client because he realized that good financial decisions begin with understanding a client's entire story. He began his career as a Certified Public Accountant with Deloitte in Los Angeles and later spent several years in corporate finance.



Sunil Lad, IAR, CHA, has worked in the hospitality industry for over 17 years and currently operates limited-service hotels in California. He is registered with FINRA and works with Cedarstone Advisors to help clients maximize yield for their hotel reserve accounts. He can be reached at Sunil@cedarstoneadvisors.com.

Cover your bases

5 ways to reduce your risk in the extended-stay market

by STEFAN BURKEY

ONCE CONSIDERED A niche market, extended-stay hotels are now emerging as prominent players in the hospitality world.

The surge in extended-stay hotels isn't just a fleeting fad – it's a reflection of shifting societal and economic dynamics. Even top-tier hotel brands are jumping on the bandwagon, investing heavily in this burgeoning market and expanding their extended stay portfolios by more than 50% during the past decade.

In Orlando alone, nearly 60% of real estate transactions in 2022 involved extended-stay properties, illustrating the robust demand for long-term lodging solutions. This growth has been spurred by various factors including an increase in remote work, more long-term travel, and natural disaster home displacement after hurricanes and wildfires.

Embracing the extended-stay model comes with a host of advantages and operational benefits for hoteliers. It can significantly enhance and stabilize revenue streams since guests often book for longer durations, leading to more consistent occupancy rates. Additionally, by catering to guests who stay for weeks or even months, hotels can reduce the frequency of room turnovers – and therefore staffing needs – and increase brand loyalty, boosting a hotel's reputation and overall profitability.

Extended-stay hotels are not just a boon for hotel owners; they also offer a range of benefits to customers, with the primary

allure being affordability since the cost of a conventional hotel can quickly become prohibitive. They typically offer spacious, home-like suites with competitive rates, often inclusive of essential amenities like Wi-Fi, laundry, and fitness facilities, fully-equipped kitchens, mail collection, 24/7 security, and key card access.

UNVEILING THE HIDDEN RISKS

While the benefits of extended stays are significant, there also are potential risks and exposures unique to this model, of which hotel owners should be aware. These extend beyond the challenging task of ensuring that rooms are well-maintained over long periods of time.

Long-term guests may exhibit different behavior patterns than those who stay for short time periods. Because it feels more like home than a traditional hotel, they are more likely to treat it as such, for better or worse.

Consider some of the following risks caused by guests:

- Cooking, lighting candles, or smoking in the room, thus raising fire concerns
- Bringing pets that can destroy the space
- Having more people in the room than occupancy allows, increasing noise, damage, and security risks

5 Best Practices For Extended Stays

To reduce risk when it comes to extended stays, hotel operators should consider adopting the following best practices:

1 Extra security measures. Invest in effective property management and security systems to streamline operations and track guest behaviors and preferences, such as wanting to stay on the first floor. Guests will appreciate extra security when staying for longer periods.

2 Train front desk staff to communicate about security features. This may include monitoring access to the back/side doors that are common to extended-stay hotels and often left propped open, creating a security concern.

3 Consider weather exposures. Extended stays will have different exposures compared to regular hotels. Wind, flooding, and more can affect any hotel, but think about what else may be needed in areas prone to CAT disasters. Devise a plan that supports revenue goals and be sure to fully discuss concerns and risks with an agent.

4 Have an emergency management plan. Extended stays often become Plan A for people caught in a natural disaster or other CAT claim situation. Know the evacuation orders and have generators and other necessary supplies on standby to keep operations running. Be aligned with any regulatory or government agency instructions and understand a four-story concrete building will be a different situation than a high-rise in the wind.

5 Let your broker know about your extended stay. Because the exposures are different in an extended-stay hotel, let your insurer know if you acquire or build one. There are multiple exclusions of which to be aware, and the policy costs and limits may differ compared to traditional hotel exposures.

The rise of extended-stay hotels is a testament to the evolving preferences and demands of modern travelers. By understanding the dynamics of the market and implementing best practices, hoteliers can capitalize on this movement and provide guests with a compelling alternative to traditional lodging. ■



Stefan Burkey is the hospitality practice leader for HUB International Florida. In this role, he oversees insurance placement solutions for owners, developers, and operators from limited-service hotels to full-scale resorts. Stefan and his team clearly understand the financial needs and exposures associated with the hospitality industry, and their singular focus has generated profound market knowledge and significant buying power for HUB clients throughout Florida and the U.S. Stefan won Risk & Insurance's 2023 Hospitality Power Broker of the Year.

In search of solutions

Finding technology solutions that work within the independent landscape

by RICKY PATEL

IN THE EVER-EVOLVING LANDSCAPE of hospitality, technology stands as a cornerstone, fundamentally transforming hotel operations and services. Its pivotal role in enhancing guest experiences and streamlining operational efficiency cannot be overstated. There was a time when check-ins and accounting relied on pen and paper, and banners and signs were the go-to method to attract passing vehicles, highlighting the profound transformation brought about by technology in today's landscape. Today, independent properties benefit from choosing and implementing technology tailored to their specific needs, allowing for a personalized and efficient approach aligned with each property's distinctive character.

JUST FOR YOU

Independent hotels can leverage back-office technology of their choice as a powerful tool to enhance operational efficiency and streamline various facets of their business. Implementing a property management system (PMS) tailored to the property's needs allows ownership groups to make decisions that fit their unique requirements. Financial processes are optimized through the integration of accounting software, automating tasks such as invoicing, expense tracking, and payroll. Back-office technology allows efficient communication among departments,

ensuring a seamless flow of information. Analytics tools integrated into the back office enable data-driven decision-making, providing insights into occupancy patterns, guest preferences, and operational bottlenecks. Embracing back-office technology enables independent hotels to streamline day-to-day operations and deliver a more personalized and efficient guest experience.

LET'S SAVE

Investing in energy-efficient technologies, such as smart thermostats and lighting systems, significantly reduces utility bills for independent hotels. These systems automatically adjust settings based on occupancy, optimizing energy consumption and lowering costs. Choosing the right technology, such as hotel room energy control units and wireless AC control, is crucial for maximizing cost savings. Leveraging utility company rebates further enhances the financial benefits of adopting these energy-efficient solutions aligning with sustainability goals, and providing both environmental and financial advantages.

CLICK OF A BUTTON

Seamless guest experiences are synonymous with technology in the modern hospitality landscape. From online reservation systems to guest engagement technology and reputation management systems, hotels can streamline the

check-in/check-out process and empower guests with convenience and control over their stay.

MORE EYES ON YOU

In the digital age, a robust online presence is critical for attracting and engaging guests. Technology enables hotels to leverage social media platforms, online travel agencies (OTAs), and their own websites for effective property marketing. Virtual tours and targeted advertising empower hotels to reach a global audience and remain competitive in a crowded market.

HAVE IT YOUR WAY!

When evaluating new technologies, independent hotel ownership groups face the challenge of selection. While branded properties rigorously test and vet technology solutions and require the use of certain technology and systems, independent hotels have the freedom to choose systems tailored to their unique style and customer base. The challenge lies in navigating the vast array of available technologies. To address this, the first step is identifying specific needs and desired outcomes. Attending hotel conferences and trade shows is crucial for gaining knowledge about the available technologies in the industry. Assessing whether the chosen technology contributes to operational efficiency, cost-effectiveness, or

“

While branded properties rigorously test and vet technology solutions and require the use of certain technology and systems, independent hotels have the freedom to choose systems tailored to their unique style and customer base.”

adds value to the bottom line is essential. Lastly, requesting a trial or a sample before implementation allows you to test and vet the technology solution firsthand.

In conclusion, as technology advances, its impact on the independent hotel industry will continue to evolve. Independent hotels that embrace and integrate technology have a chance to be at the forefront of the industry. The symbiotic relationship between hospitality and technology is not just a trend but a fundamental shift promising enhanced guest experiences, more efficient operations, and increased competitiveness for independent hotels. ■



Ricky Patel serves as the President of Toli Ventures, a Los Angeles-based hotel company specializing in the acquisitions and management of hotels and motels, primarily in the Southern California region. His academic background includes a degree in Economics from the University of California, Irvine (UCI), and a specialization in Accounting from the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). He can be reached at Rickyp@toliventures.com.

TECH TALK

Utilizing new solutions to improve the guest experience

by TIM DAVIS

HOW CAN HOTEL BUSINESSES of all sizes use data-driven strategies to enhance the guest experience, tune into and meet new consumer needs, and differentiate their brand to drive loyalty and increase repeat business?

Guest experience is neither about the product nor the service a hotel or hotel brand offers – it’s far more all-encompassing than that.

While the product (the physical offering, the quality of the hotel, its rooms, its restaurant and bars, etc.) and the service (delivery to the guests, warm welcomes, well-anticipated guest needs, etc.) are important elements, the guest experience has the potential to lift both to a higher dimension.

Guest experience is about how guests interact with the hotel brand – from starting a search for a hotel booking, all the way through to checking out from the stay.

Good guest experience ensures a relevant and appealing offer, ease, and accessibility for customers, visibility, and clarity of choices enabling consumer confidence and the flexibility to get what they want, how they want it, and when they want it. Importantly, it’s a core driver for brand affinity and loyalty.

In today’s market, there are three main drivers for change when it comes to improving guest experience:

1 BRAND DIFFERENTIATION

This entails improving brand appeal and standing out from the competition. Going beyond products and services, guest experience leaves a lasting impact. Arguably, brand differentiation is the most important of all three drivers due to the recent proliferation of hotel brands in the market, as it’s how a hotel or brand stands out beyond the key consumer criteria of location, price, and quality.

2 CONSUMER DEMAND

Guest experience is being prioritized across multiple sectors, meaning consumers now are more demanding and more discerning. Technology has empowered consumers to engage with businesses in new and different ways.

3 BUSINESS EFFICIENCY

In a world where labor availability and cost challenges are much higher, the ability to automate the end-to-end business processes around delivering guest service through digital technology offers a tremendous opportunity for up-side efficiencies.

TECHNOLOGY'S ROLE

While technology has improved the hotel booking process exponentially in recent years, technology that improves the guest experience is being implemented less readily. The levels of capability are similar, but the technology is available to empower customers to have the experience that they want. And what's important here is that it's through digital channels that customers increasingly want to control their purchases and experiences.

According to a recent AHLA report, "Travelers today are inundated with choices. With myriad options at their fingertips, they've become increasingly selective about the properties they stay at and the experiences they choose. Factor in the growing influence of digital technologies, and it's clear that the demand for personalized experiences accessible with a tap or swipe is more prevalent than ever." At the heart of this evolution lies the need for a cohesive and connected technology platform.

Further, the report explains, "shifting guest preferences have opened new avenues for technology adoption, creating more opportunities for growth in the industry. By adapting to the new digital terrain, hotels can offer an exceptional guest experience, cementing their place in a constantly changing market."

However, it's important this isn't just seen as an opportunity to create a digital app for guests.

The true benefit and power derives from enabling guests to interact with the hotel and brand through their preferred means, whether that's a digital app or existing platforms such as WhatsApp or other messenger apps, telephones (in-room or mobile), on a website, or simply walking up to the front desk for assistance.

Consequently, the business needs to be designed to operate with customer interaction arriving from various sources. So, what's also vitally important is that this is linked to automated processes that route the messages to the relevant person to quickly solve that query. Enabling immediate, real-time relevant responses.

As an article in *The New York Times* explains, "A recent study from the industry



Good guest experience ensures a relevant and appealing offer, ease, and accessibility for customers, visibility, and clarity of choices enabling consumer confidence and the flexibility to get what they want, how they want it, and when they want it."

magazine *Hospitality Technology* and the University of Nevada's William F. Harrah College of Hospitality in Las Vegas, surveyed 100 hotel operators and noted that adoption across the industry of self-service features like check-in kiosks and mobile room keys is booming. Proponents say the guest benefits behind these investments are numerous, from personalizing the hotel experience and anticipating guest needs to reducing their 'friction' points and freeing up staff."

LET THY BUSINESS PROSPER

As stated recently in *Forbes*, "The customer experience has always been tied to profits, but advanced technologies are taking hospitality to new heights in business resilience. From the traveler's perspective as well, digitalization has never been more welcoming." Utilizing such technologies delivers far greater insight data about guest behavior.

This can then be used to drive greater efficiencies in the operational processes of the hotel, as well as shaping how and what's offered to guests to further improve their brand experience.

For example, if guests can inform the hotel about when they plan to arrive and

leave, then the checking in and out processes ought to enable housekeeping to schedule labor as and when rooms need to be made ready for availability – thus enabling a streamlining of resources by engaging the labor when it's needed and delivering a better service for the guests by having rooms ready on arrival.

Offering alternative solutions for guests, such as daily room cleans, or a free minibar, allows an experience guests can tailor and creates insight data that can inform housekeeping services and consumer preference for shaping future engagements.

Such customer-insight data is invaluable. It delivers the ability to understand customer needs, preferences, behavior, history, value, attitude, sentiment, and more – and also leverage that data to trigger and/or respond in a way that's relevant, whether that's offering them something appealing and relevant or providing helpful information at all stages of the customer journey. This is where hotel businesses can start to really elevate their guest experience.

EVERYONE WINS

Clever implementation of technology – including customer data platforms and multimedia marketing automation systems – streamlines processes and enables real-time actions directly in response to consumer wants and needs, as well as offering a better guest experience and improved customer data on their wants and needs.

This brings us back to the factors that are driving the need to improve guest experience; It's through this clever implementation of technology where you really start to build brand affinity and loyalty and stand out from the busy crowd. ■



Tim Davis is PACE Dimensions' leading management consultant for the hospitality, travel, and leisure sector with PACE Dimensions, a company that is an expert in designing

guest experience strategies that drive brand love and the technology capabilities needed to implement them successfully. Learn more at www.pacedimensions.com.

All for **One** **One** for all

The importance of combatting human trafficking and AAHOA's role in helping educate the industry

by EVELYN HOOVER

National Human Trafficking Awareness Day is recognized each year on January 11. In recognition of this important day, and throughout the month of January, AAHOA encourages the industry to participate in #WearBlueDay on January 11 and help raise awareness of human trafficking.

JANUARY MARKS NATIONAL Human Trafficking Prevention Month, spotlighting the alarming presence of this horrendous crime worldwide. AAHOA stands at the forefront, actively engaging its 20,000 members – alongside elected officials, community leaders, nonprofits, and businesses – in a collective effort to amplify awareness and support policy measures to combat human trafficking. While much work remains to be done, strides are being made, and AAHOA is helping to spearhead the fight through impactful initiatives and partnerships to save lives and protect hotel businesses.

1 AAHOA BACKS BEST PRACTICES, ENHANCED REPORTING REQUIREMENTS TO END HUMAN TRAFFICKING

In a significant move last summer, AAHOA endorsed the bipartisan *National Human Trafficking Hotline Enhancement Act*. This legislation, led by Reps. Laurel Lee (R-FL) and Kathy Castor (D-FL), would introduce more uniformity in the reporting of suspected human and sex trafficking by mandating entities that contract with the National Human Trafficking Hotline to cooperate with state and local law enforcement when receiving tips through the hotline.

“As hoteliers who are strongly committed to doing our part to stop human trafficking, AAHOA Members are proud to support Rep. Laurel Lee and Rep. Kathy Castor’s legislation to enhance mandatory reporting requirements,” said AAHOA Chairman Bharat Patel. “Hotels and other businesses, our local law enforcement, and all Americans must come together to protect our fellow human beings from the atrocious plague of sex and labor trafficking. We must be constantly vigilant to bring an end to any form of trafficking in our hotels.”



To date, AAHOA has trained more than 7,000 people to recognize the signs of human trafficking through the **BEST Inhospitable to Human Trafficking Training Sponsored by AAHOA**. Scan the QR Code to learn more about this free training.

2

STATE ATTORNEYS GENERAL BRING IMPORTANT DISCUSSION CONCERNING HUMAN TRAFFICKING AWARENESS TO AAHOA REGIONALS

During the 2023 Regional Conference & Regional season, AAHOA took proactive steps by inviting state attorneys general and law enforcement officials to engage in discussions with local hoteliers. These state and local leaders were happy to learn about the BEST Inhospitable to Human Trafficking Training Sponsored by AAHOA. This training is completely free and available online 24/7/365 for all AAHOA Members and their employees. Thousands of hospitality employees have already completed this human trafficking awareness training.

North Carolina Attorney General Josh Stein, who addressed attendees at the North Carolina Regional last summer, applauded AAHOA Members in his state for contributing to the state’s safety and voiced anticipation for continued collaboration in the fight against human trafficking.

“I want to thank each of you for what you are doing by training your employees and partnering with law enforcement to fight this terrible crime,” Stein shared. “You all helped make North Carolina a great and safe state to live, work, and visit, keep people safe from crime, and protect our most vulnerable residents. I look forward to working alongside you all in the months and years to come.”

During his remarks, Stein, whose office plays a pivotal role in the Human Trafficking Commission, shared insights into their multifaceted approach. He has worked on legislation to combat child marriage in North Carolina and championed the *Safe Child Act*, which requires an adult who knows that a child is being sexually exploited to report it to law enforcement. Additionally, under Stein’s leadership, his team is training law enforcement officers at the North Carolina Department of Justice on how to use technology to investigate human trafficking, especially as it relates to the online human trafficking market and to child sex investigations.

In addition to Stein, state attorneys general from California, New Jersey, and South Carolina also showed up and spoke on the importance of collaboration with those on the front lines to keep communities safe.

3

LUCY: ARKANSAS’ ESD K9

In 2023, the AAHOA Government Affairs team also had the opportunity to meet with Arkansas Deputy Attorney General Ryan Cooper and explore ways AAHOA can assist in preventing this crime. The meeting addressed strong strategies and defenses, as well as Arkansas’ inaugural Human Trafficking Summit, held on October 16-17, 2023, at the Statehouse Convention Center in Little Rock, AR. This summit brought together national and local experts to explore pivotal topics such as familial trafficking, trauma-informed investigations, human trafficking in the private sector, and strategies to strengthen public and private partnerships.

During the meeting between Arkansas Deputy Attorney General Cooper and the AAHOA Government Affairs team, Cooper presented AAHOA with an emblematic pin featuring Lucy, a K9 Officer. Lucy is one of 100 electronic storage detection (ESD) K9s in the world and the only one in Arkansas. Lucy is trained to detect chemical compounds found in data storage devices and will assist with search warrants to locate electronic devices that contain critical evidence for law enforcement. Lucy will also help the state in crimes against children cases and, in her downtime, serve as a companion dog for victims.

4

AAHOA’S OUTREACH FROM AAHOACON TO TOWN HALLS

At last year’s AAHOACON23 in Los Angeles, the Association partnered with Covenant House California to help raise money and awareness for youth facing homelessness and trafficking. The event included a merchandise store that sold AAHOACON23-branded t-shirts, jackets, and socks, where up to 80% of the proceeds supported CHC. CHC is a non-profit youth shelter that provides sanctuary and support for unhoused youth or who are survivors of human trafficking, ages 18-24.

During a Town Hall meeting in Artesia, CA, AAHOA helped bridge the communication gap between hoteliers and their local governments. The Town Hall consisted of a panel discussion of district attorneys, superior court judges, Los Angeles Police Department staff, Los Angeles Sheriff Department staff, as well as mental health and domestic violence first responders. AAHOA also educated the attendees on the universal “distress” hand signal, which victims can use to convey their need for rescue and assistance in human and sex trafficking situations. AAHOA hopes to continue to replicate this model in future Town Hall events across the country.

As we reflect on these endeavors, it becomes evident the fight against human trafficking requires a multifaceted approach, involving education, legislation, collaboration, and compassion. AAHOA remains steadfast in its commitment to making a lasting impact on eradicating human trafficking, recognizing that collective efforts are crucial in creating a world where every individual is safe from the shackles of exploitation. ■

AAHOA MEMBERS



AAHOA North Carolina region donated \$30,001 to the Hindu Center of Charlotte during Navaratri on October 20, 2023. AAHOA has supported the Hindu Center since 2009.



[L-R] North Carolina Regional Director Pinkesh Patel, South Carolina Regional Director Fenil Desai, South Carolina Office of the Attorney General Director of Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) Programs and the State Human Trafficking Task Force Kathryn Moorehead, and AAHOA Chairman Bharat Patel at the South Carolina Regional.



AAHOA Chairman Bharat Patel (fifth from left) welcomed hoteliers from Augusta, GA, at the South Carolina Regional Conference & Trade Show.



[L-R] AAHOA Secretary Rahul Patel, Vice Chairman Miraj S. Patel, Oklahoma Restaurant Association President & CEO James Leewright, Central Midwest Regional Director Arti Patel, and Chairman Bharat Patel helped closed out the 2023 Regional season in Oklahoma.



At a Charity Gala, AAHOA Member Prakash Saraf delivered a heartfelt thank-you speech upon receiving the prestigious Lifetime Achievement Award. This honor, bestowed by the President of the United States, recognizes individuals who have dedicated over 4,000 hours to community service.

IN ACTION



Congresswoman Jasmine Crockett, representing Texas' 30th District, participated in an AAHOA Back-of-the-House Tour. She rolled up her sleeves and immersed herself in the daily operations of running a hotel business alongside AAHOA Member Nirmal Patel.



[L-R] AAHOA North Central Regional Director Bhavesh N. Patel, Ohio State Senator and AAHOA Member Niraj Antani, and AAHOA Chairman Bharat Patel showed support for hoteliers at the North Central Regional.



AAHOA Members attended a public hearing on the proposed Responsible Hotel Ordinance during a Los Angeles City Council meeting.



Women hoteliers enjoy an insightful business meeting at the Mid Atlantic Regional.

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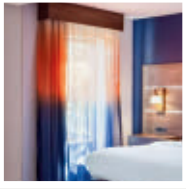
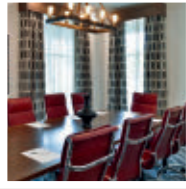
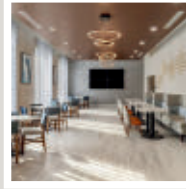
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