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The Official Publication of AAHOA

## Building Tomorrow Today

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Highlighting AAHOA's Spring National Advocacy Conference

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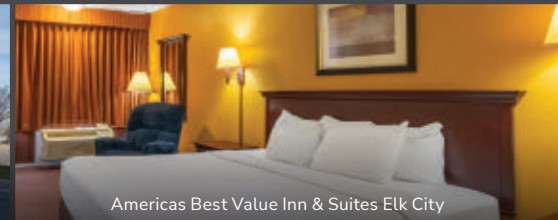
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# 5 Things to Know About AAHOA This Month

## 1 THANKS FOR JOINING US IN ORLANDO

Just like Disney, AAHOACON24 was a truly magical experience last month in Orlando, FL. Thousands of hotel owners came together to hear world-class keynote speakers, take part in top level education sessions, make deals on the Trade Show floor, and network during the event in Orlando. The annual convention also held the election for the 2024-25 Board of Directors. Congratulations to new AAHOA Secretary Pinal S. Patel and all our newly elected leaders!

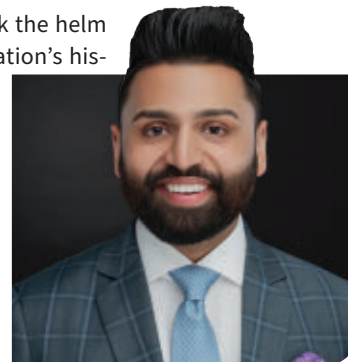
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## 2 AAHOA WELCOMES A NEW CHAIRMAN

Last month, Miraj S. Patel, MBA, CHO, CHIA, took the helm as the youngest AAHOA Chairman in the association's history. Miraj is a second-generation hotelier who began his career in hospitality from a young age growing up in his family's first 30-room independent property. In this edition of *Today's Hotelier*, he shares his vision and priorities for 2024-2025. Please join us in congratulating and welcoming Miraj.

**See article on page 10.**



## 3 AAHOA CELEBRATES THIS MONTH

May is Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander Heritage Month by presidential proclamation. As an organization that has long represented the interests of Asian Americans in hospitality, AAHOA is proud to celebrate the contributions of our members. Additionally, May 19-25 is National Travel and Tourism Week, which celebrates the U.S.



travel community and travel's essential role in stimulating economic growth, cultivating vibrant communities, creating quality job opportunities, inspiring new businesses and elevating the quality of life for Americans every day. AAHOA is grateful for the hard work of all our members in their contributions to travel and tourism.

## 4 AAHOA CONGRATULATES 2024 AWARD WINNERS

Congratulations to the eight outstanding leaders who were recognized at the AAHOA Convention &

Trade Show for their drive to find new solutions for hotel businesses and taking the industry to the next level. Join us in celebrating them!  
[AAHOA.com/Awards](https://AAHOA.com/Awards)



## 5 AAHOA HOTEL OWNER CONFERENCES

Rebranded in 2024, the AAHOA Hotel Owner Conferences & Trade Shows kick off this month, running through November. Everyone in the industry is invited to attend for learning opportunities, networking, and the latest updates for hoteliers that you won't get anywhere else. Find your event at [AAHOA.com/](https://AAHOA.com/)





**MIRAJ S. PATEL,**  
**MBA, CHO, CHIA**  
 AAHOA CHAIRMAN (2024-2025)

“  
 As we celebrate  
 AAHOA’s 35th  
 anniversary, I  
 will continue  
 to build on the  
 success this  
 association  
 has built over  
 the past  
 35-plus years.”

**Learn more  
 about Miraj  
 and his  
 plans for the  
 upcoming year  
 on page 10.**

## Looking to a better tomorrow

“We are only as strong as we are united, as weak as we are divided.” - J.K. Rowling

### **A** AHOACON24 WAS ONE FOR THE BOOKS, AND I’M READY TO HIT THE GROUND

running as AAHOA’s newest Chairman.

AAHOACON24 had more than 7,000 registered attendees and 524 exhibitors at the Orange County Convention Center. There were 44+ education sessions, and just over 84,500 square feet of exhibit.

On top of that, 100% of all exhibiting hotel brands rebooked for AAHOACON25.

We are just getting started!

On stage at our annual Convention & Trade Show, I shared several video clips of promises I made when I ran for AAHOA Secretary. However, we must be unified in our approach.

I followed up on each one, explaining what AAHOA has already done, and the plans for the future. I explained how we plan on keeping those promises...promises to our members and the entire hospitality industry.

Under my leadership as AAHOA Chairman, along with AAHOA’s Board of Directors and other volunteer leaders, AAHOA will continue to improve.

Together, we will focus on the **top four industry challenges:**

**Number one: Brands** – on the impact on profitability. Among other items, we must be unified... We must come together to educate, innovate, and challenge the brand purchasing mandates with a free enterprise methodology.

**Number two: Industry Disruptors** – such as short-term rentals. The short-term rental industry must play on the same level playing field as our industry.

**Number three: Costs** – in comparison to the airline industry, the lack of efforts on evolving our hotel business model and our rate model has directly impacted our NOI. It’s time to change that.

**Number four: Regulations** – actively paying attention to and being on the offense against regulations and laws that are confusing and hurting our membership and our industry. How many people know that a hotelier and hotel, including previous ownership, can be sued 15-20 years later? Revamping our education efforts for relevance and consistency at the local, state, and federal level will be key. However, your participation will be critical.

As your AAHOA Chairman, I will help improve and streamline our strategies when it comes to our bottom line – and only focus on things that help us make more money, save more money, and protect our investments.

Like the AAHOACON24 saying goes: I’m looking forward to building a better tomorrow, today. As we celebrate AAHOA’s 35th anniversary, I will continue to build on the success this association has built over the last 35-plus years with simple, straightforward solutions.

You have my commitment. ■



**LAURA LEE BLAKE, ESQ.**  
AAHOA PRESIDENT & CEO

## Let's tell our story

“If everyone is moving forward together then success takes care of itself.” - Henry Ford

“

We are not going to win every battle, and we are not going to always change a politician's mind. But we continue to grow the influence AAHOA has in this industry, and we will continue to strive to make a difference.”

**IT WAS AMAZING TO SEE EVERYONE SUNNY ORLANDO, FL, FOR THIS YEAR'S ANNUAL Convention & Trade Show – AAHOACON24.**

During the past two years, since I have been leading this association, I have been faced with issues that constantly bring me back to my roots.

As a leader, you step back and you often ask, “what is the answer here?” when faced with a problem. Back when I worked for AAHOA more than a decade ago, I remember AAHOA had been trying to reach out to Senator Chuck Grassley to talk about AAHOA's suggestions for comprehensive immigration reform and the potential impact on the hotel industry.

Since I am originally from Iowa, and he was my U.S. Senator, I flew to Iowa to catch up with him as he hosted town hall meetings throughout the state.

I went to a few meetings with AAHOA's then Upper Midwest Regional Director Satish (Sunny) Gabhawala and a dedicated team of hoteliers. Senator Grassley listened carefully to our recommendations, and later we took a photo together. Afterward, Senator Grassley said he would continue to address the topic of immigration reform, and appreciated our efforts to meet with him in person to openly discuss the issues.

Needless to say, even though we were unable to reach a resolution at that time, he kept his word. We are still talking about immigration reform nearly two decades later because of the impact on this country, including the travel industry.

In the end we got the photo, and in April of that year, that photo ended up on the front cover of AAHOA's then *Lodging Business Magazine* for the April issue.

To this day, AAHOA continues to discuss important issues with our government officials that will impact AAHOA and hotel owners across the country. Even though sometimes these things do not work out like the way we intended, we got our name out there and established relationships.

We are not going to win every battle, and we are not going to always change a politician's mind. But In the end, we continue to grow the influence AAHOA has in this industry, and we will continue to strive to make a difference.

Since that time, AAHOA has helped to strengthen the hospitality industry and influence public policy many times on issues that matter most to our members and the industry at large.

If you remain true to yourself and what you believe in, sticking to the goals you set out to achieve, you might not be able to change someone's mind, but you may end up on the cover of a magazine and have a good story to tell. ■

# Building Tomorrow Today

New AAHOA Chairman  
Miraj S. Patel on the importance  
of seizing opportunities

by CARTER DAVIS

**A**T THE CONCLUSION OF AAHOACON24 IN Orlando, FL, on April 5, Miraj S. Patel officially began his tenure as AAHOA Chairman for 2024-2025. As the youngest Chair in AAHOA's history, Patel first joined the AAHOA Board of Directors in 2019 when he was elected as the Young Professional Director Western Division, followed by his election as AAHOA Secretary at AAHOACON21 in Dallas, TX. Despite what may seem like a quick ascendency on the outside, Patel has been preparing for this moment nearly his entire life.

A second-generation hotelier, Patel began his career in hospitality from a very young age, growing up in his family's 30-room independent property in Texas.

"My brother and I literally grew up there," he said. "We shared a bunk in a tiny room that connected to my parents' room. My parents sacrificed for us and that hotel in countless ways, putting aside what they wanted, to not only appease their parents, so their children could reap the benefits in the future."

Patel recalled tagging along with his dad to AAHOA events even before he was 10 years old. After attending his first AAHOACON in 2013 in Houston, TX, he hasn't missed one since.



## FROM THE GROUND UP

The independent property Patel's family owned, he said, "gave my family an opportunity to create a new future, and it allowed me to attend Johnson and Wales University in Miami, FL, one of the premier hospitality schools in the country."

However, though Patel was physically far from Texas during his time at school in Florida, he remained active in AAHOA. On his 18th birthday, Patel asked for a slightly atypical gift from his parents; he requested they invest for him to become an AAHOA Lifetime Member.



"My dad thought I was nuts," he recalled. However, that forward-thinking decision kickstarted Patel's eventual rise to the role of AAHOA Chairman.

Just a few years later, Patel was elected as the youngest Secretary in AAHOA's now-35-year history, and his journey is just getting started.

And that 30-room property in Texas where Patel lived with his family?

"It's been 26 years, and we still have that hotel in our portfolio today," he said, proudly.

## LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

As he begins his tenure, Patel points to a few key issues where he feels like the industry needs to be focused to move forward.

"I'm exceptionally proud of the relationships we've built with our federal legislators, but we've made significant progress on the state and local levels, as well," he said. "We need to be in front of these representatives, explaining the unique needs of our industry

AAHOA Chairman Miraj S. Patel and his fiancée, Binita Patel, pictured together. The couple is set to marry in late Summer 2024.

and why certain laws could impact small business owners and entrepreneurs"

And, while Patel worked closely with AAHOA leadership to identify the challenges for his 2024-2025 tenure, he speaks of one aspect quite frequently and cites it as the cornerstone of all industry growth. Learn more on the following page.

"The most important element that runs through everything is NOI," he said. "Everything we do as hoteliers should ultimately be done to increase NOI, whether you're a franchised property or an independent. And, while independents have plenty of their own unique challenges, franchised properties are facing potential dilution of brand value due to the number of new brands coming to market, leaving consumers with a struggle to differentiate in the marketplace."

Patel along with the AAHOA Board of Directors, is committed to truly helping hoteliers by following AAHOA's mission, vision, and core values, pushing AAHOA to evolve, elevate, and protect the industry as a whole.

"I look forward to challenging all of us to stay focused on what matters with intention, clear goals, realistic objectives, and simple and straightforward solutions," Patel said. "Simply put, we will put our members at the center of every decision we make."

## THE FUTURE IS BRIGHT

As the youngest Chairman in AAHOA's history, Patel hopes others will use his story as fuel for their own careers.

"I'm always encouraging young professionals to not let age determine success. Many times, people may say you're too young or you can't do what other people are doing, but that's absolutely not true. There are so many folks who are young but still do whatever it takes to find success. If you never try, you'll never know what you're capable of achieving."

The lessons Patel said he hopes to pass onto those early in their careers in the industry that has already given him so many opportunities are simple – take advantage of every opportunity and get involved, network and make as many meaningful connections as possible, and let AAHOA be the foundation.

"I am where I am today because of AAHOA, and it's incredibly reassuring to know the same is true for so many other AAHOA Members." ■



“

Everything we do as hoteliers should ultimately be done to increase NOI, whether you're a franchised property or an independent.”



## AAHOA's top industry challenges in 2024 and beyond

During the first meeting of the 2024-2025 AAHOA Board of Directors, Chairman Miraj S. Patel laid out what he sees as the top four industry challenges facing AAHOA Members, and the industry, in the short-term future.



Brand dilution and value  
Lack of innovation  
Unrealistic renovation cycles  
Decreasing profitability and NOI  
Pursuit of free enterprise



Online travel agencies (OTAs)  
Short-term rentals (STRs)  
Tech companies  
Influences from COVID-19



Workforce  
Increased tech requirements  
Insurance  
Evolution of hotel business model  
Creating a new rate model



HR landscape  
PCI compliance  
Immigration laws and regulations  
Safety and compliance  
Brand regulations  
Lending  
Maintaining relationships with state association partners

“Building Tomorrow Today”



STEFAN HOLM/SHUTTERSTOCK.COM

**IN-HOUSE**

# Hiring

Best practices for identifying and nurturing high-potential employees

by NICK FORTUNA

**P**RIOR TO A HORSE RACE, IT'S OFTEN difficult to separate the athletes from the also-rans, but it's a different story in the conference room, where ambitious employees come armed with their best ideas and a positive attitude, becoming standouts within an organization.

That's been true consistently for Chris Guimbellot, president and chief executive of hihotels, which holds a weeklong strategy and team-building session each year in Fort Lauderdale, FL. The annual visit to the Sunshine State really is the time to shine for the franchise company's dozen or so employees, most of whom work remotely.

During those trips, Guimbellot will try to visit Gulfstream Park, where he'll read the racing form

and place a wager or two. But when he's with his employees, he reads the room, taking note of workers who grab the bit, so to speak, and offer sensible suggestions.

Employees who provide useful recommendations are showing they care about the company's success, Guimbellot said. Even proposals that are discarded can elevate an employee in the eyes of management as long as they're well thought out and indicate an understanding of the business, he added.

"Everyone has a seat at the table, and it's an open forum," Guimbellot said. "I'm looking at who's bringing in ideas and the caliber of those ideas. That's definitely a technique that has helped us a lot."

### FOR ALL SHAPES AND SIZES

For companies of all types, the benefits of promoting internally are obvious. They avoid recruiting and onboarding costs, and since internal candidates already know the business's operations and culture, there's less risk of a bad fit, according to Dr. Finley Cotrone, associate professor of hospitality at UNLV and director of the Sands Center for Professional Development.

Seeing a colleague promoted also can inspire workers to stick with their companies, according to the 2020 Global Talent Trends report from LinkedIn. The report found that workers at companies that promote more internal candidates stay 41% longer than employees at companies with poor internal hiring rates.

Yet some companies don't do enough to identify their potential stars, and when they do, they pay them like benchwarmers, Cotrone said.

"We've seen what I call a loyalty tax, where employees who stayed with a company a long time were actually paid less when they were promoted than those who had job-hopped," she said. "Why would I stay if the people who are new to the organization are being paid more than me?"

Paying top performers what they're worth is one way hoteliers can nurture their talent pipeline. Here are eight additional best practices for promoting from within.



### HIRE THE RIGHT PEOPLE

The prolonged labor shortage means most hoteliers never stop looking for jobseekers. But Neil J. Flavin, chief operating officer for HVS Asset & Hotel Management, said it's best to be choosy, to the extent possible, focusing on jobseekers who want a career and not just a job.

It may sound simple, but asking jobseekers what they want out of a job and where they see themselves in a few years is a good way to start, Flavin said.

"Obviously, the key is hiring the right person to begin with, and given the current labor situation, that often takes a bit longer than it has in the past," he said. "It's worth taking additional time to find that right employee who has a real desire to be successful in the hotel business. What we do from there is what makes the difference.

"I focus on attitude," Flavin added. "If someone has the right attitude, you can teach them the skills they need."

Guimbellot, of hihotels, echoed that sentiment, saying there's a reason why every employer asks jobseekers about their goals.

"I really think the answers to those questions can help you gauge what type of staffer that person is going to be," he said.



### ESTABLISH THE RULES

"The most challenging leadership position is that first one, going from a peer to a boss," said UNLV's Cotrone. To smooth that transition, it's best to speak with employees in small groups about what makes a good manager and which behaviors are problematic, she said.

Problems arise when workers get promoted despite having badmouthed other

employees or having spread gossip, so employees need to be trained to refrain from those behaviors.

Likewise, new hires often discover that there are two ways to perform any task: the way management wants it done and the way workers actually do it every day. When one employee gets promoted to manager and asks former colleagues to adhere to the stricter standard, that's a recipe for friction, Cotrone said.

"Everyone in the organization needs to know that if you want to be promoted, you don't get to cut corners," she said. "You have to be the best version of yourself so when you're promoted to a supervisory position, you don't get pushback from former peers who say, 'You can't tell me not to do that. I saw you do that for the year that we worked together.'"



### PROVIDE ROBUST TRAINING

Cotrone said training should become increasingly sophisticated as workers climb the corporate ladder. Once a company identifies the gap between a worker's skills and the knowledge needed to advance, it can tailor its development classes accordingly, she said. Hotel companies that lack internal career-development resources can turn to universities and organizations like AAHOA for expertise.

Hotels may have promising employees gain exposure to several different departments, broadening their understanding of the business. Workers also benefit from having a proven mentor show them the ropes, Cotrone said. Important topics include how to interview jobseekers, coach employees, apply progressive discipline to underperformers, and handle HR compliance issues, she said.

Hoteliers should attempt to pair mentors with mentees who share similar interests, and they should ask for frequent progress reports to ensure that mentors are taking their role seriously, Cotrone said.

“

The most challenging leadership position is that first one, going from a peer to a boss.”

“Mentoring is really important, especially for women and people of color because men generally aren’t shy about asking for what they need,” she said. “A mentorship is really personal, so one potential pitfall is mismatching people. But when a rockstar employee has a solid mentor and that relationship is strong, they will climb the ladder quite well, and a strong mentoring relationship can last forever.”



#### START SMALL

Give ambitious employees a taste of life as a manager by making them a shift supervisor for a day or by putting them in charge of a pilot project. The way they handle that added responsibility will reveal whether they’re management material, according to Dr. Cass Shum, another associate professor of hospitality at UNLV.

“Basically, you slowly empower them and test their leadership ability,” Shum said.

Guimbellot, of hihotels, said he recently employed that strategy successfully, appointing an employee to spearhead the creation of the company’s online franchisee education portal. Guimbellot and several others developed an outline for the project and then handed it off to the employee, who steered it to completion with guidance from management.

“The portal was launched on time before the end of the year, and we’ve been adding to it ever since,” he said. “You have to strike a fine balance because you don’t want to leave them out in the cold with no help, but you also don’t want to micromanage them. I’ve found that, generally speaking, the more faith I put in someone, the better they perform.”



#### SPREAD THE GOOD NEWS

When internal candidates are promoted, those workers’ stories should be shared on the company’s website and social media channels such as LinkedIn and Facebook

– with their permission, of course – said Flavin, of HVS Asset & Hotel Management. Doing so illustrates to existing employees and jobseekers alike that the company is serious about developing top employees, he said.

“Not only does it promote your business, but it’s certainly a feel-good moment for the associate who’s just been promoted,” Flavin said.


  
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### REPLACE BAD MANAGERS

It's a cliché because it's true, according to UNLV's Shum: People don't quit jobs, they quit managers. Hotels may lose talented workers before they can progress because they're being verbally abused or treated unfairly by managers.

"Younger workers aren't just the next generation of leaders in the organization; they're the next generation – full stop – so one of the things organizations can do is to remove that kind of hostility from the workplace," Shum said.



### RECOGNIZE IMPLICIT BIAS

UNLV's Cotrone said the hospitality industry has built a diverse workforce when it comes to entry-level positions but is more homogenous in the management ranks, and implicit bias is partly to blame. If workers from diverse backgrounds can't see themselves in a leadership role, that's a major problem, she said.

"Making sure we're tapping high-potential workers across the board is vital, so if we're not attracting diverse candidates, we should ask ourselves, 'Why not?'" Cotrone said.



### IDENTIFY BARRIERS TO ADVANCEMENT

There's nothing wrong with simply clocking in and clocking out, doing your job professionally and collecting a paycheck. But if employees with good customer-service skills and a strong work ethic don't express interest in moving up, hoteliers should ask them why, Shum said.

It could be those employees have family obligations or are attending school and don't believe their circumstances would allow them to advance. In some cases, providing scheduling flexibility or some other accommodation could help the hotelier get more out of that employee, Shum said.

Since workers' circumstances may change at any time, don't wait for an annual review to address their goals, said Flavin, of HVS Asset & Hotel Management.

"A good manager is going to spot potential and follow up with that associate at least every 90 days," he said. "You want to make sure you've created a path for that associate to advance and that you're helping that associate follow that path. If we don't do that, we're failing. If a manager says they don't have the time to do that, I might start looking for another manager." ■



People don't quit jobs, they quit managers."



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# Juggling act

Effective  
leadership  
in a multi-  
generational  
hotel  
environment

by MONIQUE ROY



**B** **EING AN EFFECTIVE LEADER** in today's evolving hotel industry goes beyond operational expertise. Hospitality leaders face the complex task of leading groups of people from diverse generations, each with unique viewpoints, beliefs, backgrounds, and communication preferences. Building an efficient, productive, and inclusive atmosphere requires supporting employees from all backgrounds and skill levels.

To succeed, hotels need to function like fine-tuned machines. Guest satisfaction depends on the seamless collaboration of hotel staff and service delivery excellence. It's crucial for leaders to leverage diverse talents and skills appropriately and to carefully consider staff members' ages. Staff will range from baby boomers with decades of industry experience to tech-savvy millennials and emerging Gen Z individuals. Each generation brings its own set of skills, strengths, background, and expectations to the job. Accordingly, effective leadership and communication strategies will help hotel leaders navigate multi-generational dynamics and arm them

with practical solutions to foster collaboration, improve productivity, and enhance the customer experience.

### **WORKING AROUND THE SHORTAGE**

Research from the University of Houston and the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reported personnel shortages have affected the hospitality industry since the early months of the pandemic in 2020, leading to the loss of about 8 million jobs in the sector.

According to a January 2023 industry survey of more than 500 member hoteliers, 79% of U.S. hotels are facing a staff shortage, and 22% report the shortage is affecting hotel operations, mainly housekeeping.

Due to these workforce shortages, hotel leaders are desperate to fill positions, hiring workers from any demographic willing to take on the work to operate optimally and increase revenue.

With hiring at a premium, it's as important as ever to retain as many team members as possible, and employee retention depends on many factors, one of which is effective leadership. In the hotel industry, as in most industries operating in the digital age, leadership must go

beyond a one-size-fits-all approach. Being an effective hotel manager involves being more flexible and understanding the complex dynamics within multi-generational teams.

By embracing inclusivity, empathy, and adaptability, leaders can cultivate an environment where individuals of all ages feel valued, empowered, and inspired to contribute their best. Diversity can be an asset to building a more successful hotel business.

### UNDERSTAND YOUR EMPLOYEES

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, workers aged 45 and older make up 26% of the hospitality industry workforce. Hotels and other hospitality businesses employ four or more generations of employees. Today's multi-generational workforce includes baby boomers, Gen X, millennials, and Gen Z.

Getting to know your staff, especially their communication styles, is crucial. Each generation's preferences influence how they work and interact with others. Using a more employee-centric leadership style is vital to attracting new talent and leveraging the unique strengths of each generation to achieve organizational goals.

"As leaders, we shouldn't make assumptions about people because of what

generation they fall under, the clothing they wear, or the color of their hair," said Aaron Hall, an attorney specializing in business and employment law, as well as intellectual property and litigation. "Use open-ended questions to learn about people and discover their perspectives on discussed topics. Ask questions without bias to gain a better understanding of everyone. With a deeper understanding, hotel managers can communicate the topic they want to discuss more effectively. This strategy is essential for leaders as well as employees."

It's crucial to provide employees with the training and tools to understand how to do their jobs effectively. "Leaders must understand how well each generation or each employee performs in their job is based on a willingness to learn rather than the generation that defines them," said Carol Davies, senior vice president of commercial strategy at Driftwood Hospitality Management.

"Every individual has a different work ethic, and it runs the gamut," she said. "New systems are one important aspect that every generation needs to learn, so training is important. For the younger generation of employees, it's important to know that sales is a relationship business and you have to build connections. Picking up the phone is key to building

those relationships, which older staffers excel at, rather than sending a quick email or posting on social."

### BABY BOOMERS AND GENERATION X

There are 41 million baby boomers in today's workforce, and many want to work beyond 65. Hotel managers can use simple best practices to lead baby boomers effectively and foster collaboration among employees of all ages.

The AAHM Employer's Association suggests managers allow senior staff members to share their expertise and knowledge with younger employees. Conversely, peer mentorship can help close the generational divide within teams by giving baby boomers access to tech training from younger employees. To accommodate different communication preferences, make sure senior employees can communicate clearly, establish policies outlining the platforms that should be used to deliver and receive information, and provide the necessary training.

Employing older workers, like baby boomers and Generation X, may benefit the hotel industry by lowering the turnover rate and enabling the industry to respond to the needs of senior customers.

### MILLENNIALS AND GENERATION Z

Two generations, millennials and Gen Z, recently surveyed by Deloitte Global, are gaining attention. According to Deloitte, these employees – born between 1983 and 2003 – account for nearly half (46%) of full-time U.S. workers. Forrester Research estimates Gen Z and millennials will make up 74% of the workforce by 2030.

Many millennials and Gen Zs value meaningful action and want firms to do the same, according to Deloitte's annual millennial and Gen Z survey. Work/life balance and mental health need to be prioritized by organizations, according to millennials and Gen Z. They are encouraging leaders to reevaluate their hiring practices to improve inclusion, equity, and diversity practices. Companies will increase their resilience to change and



foster business resilience if they actively listen to the demands and concerns of younger employees and take action.

### DIFFERENT DYNAMICS

Gen Z is different from prior generations as they have experienced events like the COVID-19 epidemic and the Great Recession of 2007-2009, which have increased their awareness of safety and security issues. This generation has also witnessed the Me Too movement, as well as social justice issues, all of which have combined to make this demographic highly politically and socially aware on the whole.

This group is the most diverse generation in American history since it comprises about 50% of racial and ethnic minorities. As a result, Gen Z has played an integral role in helping push the workplace shift toward emphasizing more diversity, equity, and inclusion. In addition, Gen Z often seeks engaging jobs and tends to not prefer traditional chain-of-command leadership style, and has a reputation for letting managers know of their expectations. Typically, there's more job turnover in this age group, so to retain these younger workers, managers must oversee this group more strategically.

"Communication and transparency are critical for leading a multi-generational workforce," said Carolyn Richmond, chair of the hospitality practice group at Fox Rothschild LLC. "It's important to find a common vocabulary. Managers must bend and adapt to employees of all ages, especially Generation Z."

Key skill sets for effective leadership and approaches that work for employees of any generation include maintaining open communication, promoting candid and open dialogue among team members, and cultivating a climate of trust and constructive criticism. It is essential to keep communication flowing in both directions to motivate a 21st-century workforce. Richmond emphasized hotel leaders need to ensure they listen to their employees and show respect. She stressed that managers also need to explain why they make certain decisions. Richmond added employees are far more willing to

buy into management directives when they understand the "why."

"As hotel managers, we need to extend hospitality to our employees and make certain to follow through on respecting all employees, communicating well, and supporting all staff," Richmond said.

### EMPOWER TO INCREASE ENGAGEMENT

Both employee empowerment and engagement are critical solutions to address specific problems in hospitality organizations. Empowered employees can successfully manage unforeseen situations during service encounters. Engaged employees work with passion and pride, are devoted to their work, and show strong work involvement.

Intelligent, intuitive technology solutions keep employees proactive and engaged and better positioned to serve guests. Smart tech provides instant information to the right person at the right time.

"Employees need intuitive solutions and the right tools to efficiently work so they can be there for the guests and fulfill their needs," said Markus Feller, chief executive officer of LIKE MAGIC, a SaaS hospitality management and communications provider. "Like guests, employees also need seamless experiences to service guests, and hospitality providers must evolve to survive. To succeed, it's all about friendly and helpful human interaction on both sides – employees and guests."

Feller mentioned employees of all ages will only adopt technology solutions if they're easy to use and if they make staff-to-staff and staff-to-guest interactions easier. "Happy guests equal happy staff," he said.

With every generation possessing unique communication styles, work preferences, and career expectations, employers need to be mindful that employees have lives beyond the workplace. Flexible work schedules, cross-generational training, and mentorship opportunities can bridge the generation gap and foster employee engagement. Hotel leaders must prioritize diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives to remain competitive in the evolving hospitality landscape. ■



Communication and transparency are critical for leading a multi-generational workforce. It's important to find a common vocabulary. Managers must bend and adapt to employees of all ages, especially Generation Z."





Pushing an impactful national advocacy agenda in Washington, D.C.

# Power to the people

by TEAM AAHOA

**I**N MID-MARCH, AS PART OF THE 2024 SPRING National Advocacy Conference (SNAC), AAHOA hosted more than 200 key AAHOA leaders and members for two days in Washington, D.C., for an event designed specifically to allow members of the largest hotel owners association in the world to speak directly with legislators responsible for shaping policy and legislative activity in the years and decades to come.

The Conference opened with a legislative learning session at the Ronald Reagan Building and International Trade Center, followed by an evening Congressional Reception at the Cannon House Office Building, and then a full day of Congressional meetings.

AAHOA wrapped up SNAC with an active day on the Hill, where AAHOA leaders participated in nearly 160 in-person

Congressional meetings with U.S. Senators, Representatives, and their staff, across all party lines.

SNAC provides the opportunity for AAHOA to work with elected officials to identify viable solutions to the industry's biggest challenges. Through education, advocacy, and connecting AAHOA Members with their elected officials, SNAC continues to be an integral part of AAHOA's advocacy plan.

## **BOOTS ON THE GROUND**

AAHOA was proud to have nearly 30 key Members of Congress in attendance at its Congressional Reception. Each offered their comments and insights regarding the important role AAHOA and its members have in shaping the agenda of national policies and leading the industry in ensuring the voices of hoteliers are being heard. Elected officials also spoke one-on-one with their AAHOA Member





constituents to build and strengthen their relationships for ongoing and future impact.

Among others attending the Congressional Reception was Congressman Shri Thanedar (D-MI-13), who introduced the *Loans in Our Neighborhoods (LIONS) Act* (H.R. 7242) in February. The *LIONS Act* is designed to amend the *Small Business Act* by increasing the maximum gross loan amounts for section SBA 7(a) and 504 loans from \$5M to \$10M, something for which AAHOA has long advocated.

The first day of SNAC also featured guest speakers, including Senator Roger Marshall (R-KS) and Congressman Ro Khanna (D-CA-17).

Sen. Marshall addressed AAHOA leaders, providing insight into his background, including his upbringing, which provided him the opportunity to work in several different jobs before going to

medical school to fulfill his version of the American Dream. Sen. Marshall connected his experience working in the family business with that of AAHOA Members and said serving as a U.S. Senator is his way of giving back to the country.

Sen. Marshall also is a co-sponsor of the *Credit Card Competition Act* (S. 1838/H.R. 3881) – legislation that will promote fee, security, and service competition among credit card networks. AAHOA is advocating for the passage of the *Credit Card Competition Act*, which would help hotel owners, and other retailers across the country, save on their bottom lines.

**FOR THE CAUSE**

Congressman Khanna spoke to AAHOA Members about his upbringing and what led him to run for Congressional Office. Rep. Khanna,



the son of Indian immigrants, has much in common with AAHOA Members, and champions more Indian Americans running for office. Rep. Khanna emphasized how representation is crucial to serving Indian-American communities and strengthening America’s economic and strategic partnership with India.

“AAHOA’s Spring National Advocacy Conference in Washington, D.C., underscores our ongoing commitment to advocating for legislation that fortifies our members’ businesses nationwide and drives economic prosperity for their hotels,” said AAHOA President & CEO Laura Lee Blake. “Each year we continue to see the relationships grow between our AAHOA Members and their elected officials. We are grateful to Senator Marshall and Congressman Khanna for their support

of AAHOA, and for the nearly 30 elected officials who attended AAHOA’s Congressional Reception. Our twice-yearly advocacy conferences are quickly becoming the foundation for shaping and driving national policy, and our members are making it happen.”

“As a champion of advocacy and building relationships with elected officials, AAHOA is proud to advocate on behalf of the hotel industry in the halls of Congress,” said AAHOA Immediate Past Chairman Bharat Patel (2023-2024). “SNAC provides AAHOA leaders the opportunity to learn about the issues impacting our industry and prepares them to have productive, impactful meetings with their elected officials on Capitol Hill. AAHOA’s reputation, influence, and recognition in Washington continues to grow, and it is thanks to the AAHOA Members who take the time to make advocacy a part of their business plan.” ■



# AAHOACON<sup>24</sup> FOR Tomorrow

# Recap

by CARTER DAVIS

**P**ROVING ONCE AGAIN THE might of the AAHOA network, AAHOACON24 was another entry in the record books, with 7,000-plus registered attendees, 84,500 square feet of exhibit space, 524 exhibitors – the largest number in the event’s history – and 44-plus education sessions, not to mention countless networking opportunities, social events, and so much more.

This year’s installment marked AAHOA’s 35th anniversary, and saw attendees gathering at the sprawling Orange County Convention Center in sunny Orlando, FL, for nearly a week of time well spent. In the name of strengthening the industry, attendees learned best practices for better operating their businesses back home, made invaluable connections with fellow members and exhibiting companies, heard from numerous top-shelf speakers, and so much more – not to mention electing new members of the Board of Directors.

Opening AAHOACON24’s first General Session, AAHOA’s then-Chairman Bharat Patel cited the association’s numerous accomplishments during the past 35 years, noting the significant progress made in connecting with legislators.

“Government officials at all levels now pay attention when our members speak,” he said. “In addition, government agencies and legislators now come to us regularly to hear our opinion, learn from our expertise, and understand our point of view.”





As proof of that growing relationship, Sen. Rick Scott (D-FL) and Rep. Shri Thanedar (MI-13) addressed AAHOACON24 attendees, with the latter legislator sponsoring the AAHOA-backed *Loans in our Neighborhood (LIONS) Act*, a bill ultimately designed to increase the amount of capital available in the form of loans to small businesses.

## CONNECTIONS COUNT

By design, AAHOACON affords attendees numerous opportunities to rub elbows with their peers, making new connections, and building relationships and partnerships along the way. This year was no exception, as attendees enjoyed multiple events curated to foster fellowship – including the Welcome Reception, the Block Party at ICON Park, Classic Bollywood Night, and the event-closing Gala Reception, all of which featured amazing entertainment, food, and live music.

Always popular events, such as the Tech Pitch Competition, the HerOwnership luncheon, and several events for young professionals – the latter of which operates under the “Helping Young Professionals Evolve (HYPE)” banner – made their return and even expanded in their scope.

In addition to pre-existing, and hugely successful, events already established at previous installments of AAHOACON, this year saw the introduction of several new events, including the AAHOACON Hotel Turnaround Collegiate Championship, an independent hoteliers Workshop

and Reception, and the Kalibri Labs Certification Training, in collaboration with HerOwnership.

Also, during each day’s General Session, attendees were treated to fantastic keynote presentations, including world-renowned businessman and TV personality Kevin O’Leary, AAHOA Lifetime Member, cardiologist, and tireless philanthropist Dr. Kiran C. Patel, and India’s leading mindset coach, the motivational speaker and author Rahul Kapoor.

“We continue to raise the bar year after year, and AAHOACON24 exemplifies our commitment to excellence,” said AAHOA President & CEO Laura Lee Blake. “Celebrating AAHOA’s 35-year anniversary, the success of AAHOACON24 is a testament to the dedication of everyone involved, from our exhibitors and sponsors to our talented speakers, the AAHOA Board, and countless volunteers.”

Feedback from attendees, said Chairman Miraj S. Patel, has been overwhelmingly positive.

“It’s incredibly gratifying to know that our efforts to deliver a valuable and memorable experience were well-received, and it’s a wonderful way to kick off this next chapter for AAHOA as I step into my new role as AAHOA Chairman. As I continue my journey with AAHOA, I will do my very best to ensure AAHOA is united. We’re on a shared mission to help our members and that’s a promise I intend to see us keep.”

Please mark your calendars to join us in New Orleans next year on April 12-15 for AAHOACON25. It’s sure to be a time to remember.

# AAHOACON

Emerges as Pivotal Event for Hotel Owners Worldwide With Wave of Exciting Firsts

- **7,000+ Registered Attendees**
- **524 Exhibitors (263 of whom did not participate in AAHOACON23)**
- **44+ Education Sessions**
- **26 Sponsors (2x the amount in 2023)**
- **4 Major Networking Events**
- **84,500+ Square Feet of Event Space (The largest in AAHOACON history)**
- **100% of All Exhibiting Hotel Brands Rebooked for AAHOACON25**
- **6% Higher Event Revenue vs. 2023**
- **31% Higher Event Revenue vs. 2022**



## AAHOA LEADERSHIP UPDATE

**AAHOA congratulates Pinal Patel of Goodlettsville, TN, as the new AAHOA Secretary.**

AAHOACON24 marked the culmination of numerous campaigns, as one Officer position and 10 Board seats were up for election. Participants were able to cast their votes electronically and weren't required to be physically present at the event. Thank you to everyone who ran for office and to those who voted for candidates they believe will make AAHOA stronger.

AAHOA Members also elected the following 10 members to the Board of Directors:

**Gulf Regional Director:**  
Vimal Patel

**Mid Atlantic Regional Director:**  
Mahendra (MZ) Patel

**Mid South Regional Director:**  
Ajay Patel

**North Florida Regional Director:**  
Jayesh (Jay) Patel

**South Carolina Regional Director:**  
Fenil Desai

**South Pacific Regional Director:**  
Nilesh (Neil) Bhakta

**South Central Texas Regional Director:**  
Vikash K. Patel

**Southeast Texas Regional Director:**  
Bhavik Patel

**Southwest Regional Director:**  
Dharmesh Ahir

**Women Hoteliers Director Western Division:**  
Shetal Zina Patel

**The AAHOA Board of Directors also elected the following three members to serve as Industry Partners on the AAHOA Board:**

**Amir Ahmed**, Executive Vice President, DISH Business

**Kevin Sloan**, Managing Partner, Gauthier Murphy & Houghtaling, LLC

**Abraham Tieh**, Director of National Commercial Property Tax, O'Connor & Associates



"As we install our new Board of Directors for the 2024-25 term, I am honored to work alongside these esteemed individuals as we embark on a journey to shape the future of our association and the hospitality industry as a whole," said AAHOA Chairman Miraj S. Patel. "I congratulate Pinal on his election as AAHOA's newest Secretary and look forward to working alongside the AAHOA Officers and Board to continue to prioritize the needs of our 20,000 members, ensuring that AAHOA remains the leading voice for hotel owners nationwide."



## TECH PITCH COMPETITION

AAHOA's annual Tech Pitch Competition, Co-Powered by HFTP (Hospitality Financial and Technology Professionals) aims to discover and promote companies with groundbreaking ideas and products poised to assist the hospitality industry amid ongoing challenges, such as workforce shortages and the evolving needs of hotel-staying guests. Notably, this year's competition introduced a unique focus on the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in hospitality technology, highlighting solutions geared toward enhancing hoteliers' operational efficiency and profitability.

At AAHOACON24, Kings III Emergency Communications ultimately took home the top prize for its pitch, which highlighted how the company helps bring hotel elevator communication devices up to recently updated ADA codes for sight- and hearing-impaired guests.

"We are in our third year hosting the AAHOA Tech Pitch Competition, I am continually impressed by the caliber of entries and the innovation in our industry," said AAHOA Immediate Past Chairman Bharat Patel. "As a second-generation hotelier committed to staying abreast and at the forefront of innovation, I'm proud to honor and congratulate Kings III Emergency Communications for their dedication, ingenuity, and creativity in helping to solve issues related to emergency communications."



**AAHOACON24 AWARDS**

Each year, AAHOA recognizes the exceptional endeavors of hoteliers who exemplify service and excellence, selected by an esteemed Independent Awards Selection Committee.

The prestigious AAHOA Awards Program serves as a beacon, illuminating the path of excellence within our industry. As we celebrate this year's award recipients, we pay homage to their unwavering

dedication, tireless efforts, and remarkable leadership, which continue to drive our industry and association toward continued prosperity and success.

**This year, the following deserving winners were bestowed with one of AAHOA's highest honors:**



**AAHOA Award of Excellence**  
Dr. Jay S. Patel, COO, NashBuilt Construction,  
AAHOA Lifetime Member,  
North Florida Region



**Outreach Award for Philanthropy**  
Amit Bhakta, Founder and CEO, Nansad Group,  
AAHOA Lifetime Member,  
North Texas Region



**Political Forum Award for Advocacy**  
Ray Patel – Owner, Welcome Inn Eagle Rock, President, Northeast Los Angeles Hotel Owners Association,  
AAHOA Lifetime Member,  
Greater Los Angeles Area Region



**Cecil B. Day Community Service Award**  
Hitesh Patel, Sai Ram Hospitality, LLC,  
AAHOA Lifetime Member,  
North Texas Region  
and  
Prakash Saraf, Founder, Friends of Sparsh,  
AAHOA Lifetime Member,  
Washington DC Area Region



**Outstanding HerOwnership Award of Excellence**  
Dr. Ruby Dhalla, President & CEO, Dhalla Group of Companies,  
AAHOA Annual Member



**IAHA Independent Hotel of the Year Award**  
Lexen Hotel in Hollywood, CA  
Armaan Patel, Founder of AGA Hotels,  
AAHOA Lifetime Member,  
Greater Los Angeles Area Region



**Outstanding HYPE Award of Excellence**  
Dhruv Patel, Director of Operations, Lotus Hospitality,  
AAHOA Lifetime Member,  
Central Midwest Region

**All photos from**  
**AAHOACON <sup>24</sup>**  
**are available at**  
**AAHOAevents.com**

## COLLEGIATE TURNAROUND CHAMPIONSHIP



AAHOACON24 featured in industry-first competition with its inaugural Hotel Turnaround Collegiate Championship, which challenged university students from across the nation to compete in making the kind of operations and investment decisions all hotel owners must make to turn things around when performance is lagging. The competition is part of AAHOA's commitment to supporting the next generation of hospitality leaders.

Eleven teams of two students, each representing seven universities from all around the country, battled it out the championship, navigating a unique simulation program, HOTELsim, powered by Russell Partnership Technology, which enabled them to make decisions mirroring real-life challenges faced by all AAHOA Members. These included staffing, operations, marketing, and capital investment decisions. Each team of students "acquired" a hotel that was financially identical in terms of performing in the same market and having the same key performance indicators. Teams used HOTELsim to implement ownership strategies to improve hotel valuation and future profit potential.

After two days of hard work, Grand Valley State took home The People's Choice Award, and Oklahoma State received the Judges Championship Trophy.

"We are thrilled to honor the skilled and innovative winners of AAHOA's inaugural Collegiate Championship: Hotel Turnaround Competition," said AAHOA President & CEO Laura Lee Blake. "This groundbreaking event showcased the exceptional talents and creativity of students representing outstanding hospitality management programs as they tackled real-world challenges in hotel ownership. Witnessing their teamwork and problem-solving skills is truly inspiring. AAHOA is proud to lead the industry in providing unique opportunities to elevate and celebrate the next generation of hospitality leaders, and we thank everyone involved in bringing this vision to life."

# Trade Show



# General Sessions

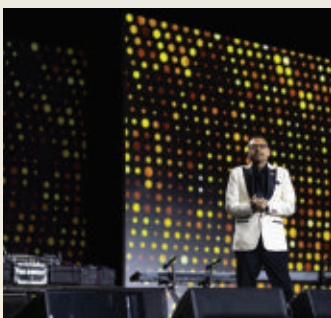




# Block Party



# Gala



# Make it *memo*

by JENNIFER BARNWELL

**T**HE HOSPITALITY industry continues to evolve, remains fiercely competitive, and includes almost endless choices for travelers. Amid this dynamic landscape, hoteliers continue to seek ways to innovate their offerings and to provide guests not only with accommodations, but also unforgettable experiences that will stay with them beyond checkout. Travelers are seeking to explore destinations for leisure, wellness and relaxation, and culinary experiences. They're also venturing into lesser-known, secondary



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## Why unique experiences should be at the forefront of a hotelier's strategy

destinations they may not have considered before along with the whole family.

One of the top travel trends today is the traveler's desire to experience hotels in a new way, connect with the destination, and create memorable experiences like they've never had before.

### FIND THE "WHY"

While it's true some travelers seek hotels based on location, member rewards, or certain amenities, it's important for hoteliers to cater to the new wave of experiential travelers seeking more than a place to rest. These travelers are planning trips around activities that cater to their interests, whether as solo travelers, couples, or a family.

Recent trend reports even show there's demand among consumers not only for new destinations but for unique bucket-list experiences. It's a growing trend amplified by the power of social media, and a new generation of savvy travelers including millennials and Generation Z.

Hoteliers should think about travel as an art form; for consumers, it makes sense for the hotels to curate these unique experiences as the experts in the industry and the destination.

### CURATION IS KEY

When developing experiences, hotels should think about making them distinct, personalized, memorable, and tied specifically to their destination. In addition to creating new experiences, hotels also should

consider unique ways to elevate current offerings to take them to the next level.

These experiences can range from local culinary adventures, immersive cultural activities, vibrant art exhibits, and outdoor adventures – providing guests with memorable and authentic moments.

At the heart of crafting unique experiences is an in-depth understanding of the guests. Hoteliers should comprehend the diverse preferences and desires of travelers, which involves recognizing every guest is unique. In addition to personalized experiences, hotels should focus on immersing guests in the local culture. Hotels can serve as a portal for guests to explore and engage with the essence of the destination. Whether it's through curated local excursions, partnerships with local artists or businesses, or even showcasing local art within the hotel premises, every touchpoint should be designed to bring the destination closer to the guest in an organic and seamless way.

Creating unique experiences not only ensures guest satisfaction but also results in positive reviews, increased customer loyalty, and word-of-mouth recommendations, which are invaluable in the highly competitive hospitality landscape.

### LEVERAGING ONLINE

Another essential aspect of crafting distinctive experiences involves ensuring their effective promotion and presentation to prospective guests. Historically,

guests have relied on hotel concierges to gather information about activities and events during their stay. However, it's crucial to proactively highlight your unique offerings well in advance of their arrival, recognizing travelers seek inspiration and information when planning their trips. Doing so can also solidify their choice of a particular hotel, since many want to ensure a straightforward and hassle-free booking process of experiences and activities.

It's important to create a website and social presence that's user-friendly and visually appealing. For example, these platforms should provide guests with ways to search for different experiences by location or interest. A dynamic platform can allow visitors to explore and draw inspiration for their next vacation.

The art of curating unique experiences for guests requires a fusion of personalization, cultural immersion, exclusive offerings, exceptional service, and a dedication to leaving an indelible mark on each guest. ■



*Jennifer Barnwell is president of Curator Hotel & Resort Collection. Launched in November 2020, Curator provides lifestyle hotels the power to compete together*

*while allowing its members the freedom to retain what makes their hotels unique. She currently serves on the Boutique Lifestyle Leaders Association (BLLA) Board of Directors.*

# Raise a hand

## Leadership and the independent hotelier

by RAVI B. PATEL

**A** **N INTEGRAL COMPONENT** of the hospitality industry is its robust system of vastly different options for guests and properties alike. Despite this wide array of possibilities, as the industry grows and the day-to-day grind continues, it can be challenging for hoteliers to break out of the day-to-day grind, step back, and identify areas of improvement where the overall experience – for staff and guest – is elevated.

Within the independent sector, however, taking stock of operational challenges and then implementing new procedures might feel less onerous without the strings that come with brand ownership. Ultimately, independent operators are leaders at heart, choosing to take the path less traveled, and they often are already looking for the next solution even before a new challenge is presented.

At the core of every successful independent operator, you'll find a passionate

leader guiding the ship, navigating operational complexities, and ensuring guests feel seen and valued. This approach is part of the reason why independent properties have stayed so resilient even in the face of extreme market challenges.

### WHY WE DO WHAT WE DO

Effective leadership in this segment of the industry goes beyond just managing finances and schedules. It's about creating a culture of hospitality that values every interaction, from the friendly front desk welcomes to the spotless room cleaning. Leading an independent isn't just about managing room inventory; there's a deeper knowledge of managing guests and their experiences involved. By prioritizing empathy, empowerment, adaptability, data-driven decisions, and continuous learning, leaders can cultivate a thriving business that delivers exceptional guest experiences and secures long-term success in a competitive market.

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A business is only as good as its leader and by fostering a culture of hospitality and embracing continuous improvement, leaders can transform their properties into havens of comfort, creating memorable experiences that keep guests coming back for more.”

Leaders in the independent market understand that guests are at the core of their business. They cultivate empathy by actively listening to guest needs, proactively addressing concerns, and going the extra mile to create a comfortable and memorable stay. This personal touch builds loyalty and positive online reviews, crucial for success in today’s digital landscape. This approach at the surface seems simple; it has its complexities as returning customers are a key achievable metric for this industry.

Operations rely on a diverse team, from housekeeping staff to maintenance workers. Successful leaders foster a collaborative environment where everyone feels valued and empowered to contribute. This involves clear communication, delegation of tasks, and recognition of individual and team achievements.

The independent industry is dynamic, facing changing guest preferences, economic fluctuations, and evolving

technologies. Leaders need to be nimble and adaptable, embracing new trends while staying true to the unique value proposition. This might involve implementing tech solutions for contactless check-in, diversifying amenities to cater to specific traveler needs, or exploring sustainable practices to attract eco-conscious guests.

The best leaders are lifelong learners. They invest in their own growth by participating in industry conferences, workshops, and leadership development programs. This knowledge is then channeled into improving team skills, implementing best practices, and staying ahead of industry trends. A business is only as good as its leader and by fostering a culture of hospitality and embracing continuous improvement, leaders can transform their properties into havens of comfort, creating memorable experiences that keep guests coming back for more.



Ravi B. Patel is an AAHOA Member having served as the 2022 Independent Hotelier Committee Chair, leading strategic industry partnerships for AAHOA

Platinum Industry Partner Bookit N Go.

# Obstacles ahead

Hospitality can expect improved 2024, but an unsettled economy keeps the pressure on

by STEFAN BURKEY

**T**HERE'S A LOT FOR THE hospitality industry to look forward to throughout 2024, as spending on business travel is expected to finally surpass 2019 levels and the surge in leisure trips is a positive indication.

But even so, hospitality businesses should stay cautious. An unsettled economic environment, aggravated by an unsettled political environment in an election year, will keep the pressure on profits. That's especially likely if inflation doesn't relent and continues to dampen travel demand and keep costs high.

In fact, increased, inflation-driven expenditures were cited as a top threat to profitability in 2024 by two-thirds of hospitality executives responding to HUB International's 2024 Outlook Executive Survey. That's affected not just commodity prices but wages, a big pressure point given the industry's labor shortage. Plus, as severe weather events occur more frequently nationwide, related costs – for property insurance and rebuilding – create another burden to hoteliers.

Here's what the industry can expect in the rest of 2024 and how it will influence risk management strategies moving forward.

## HELP WANTED – STILL – AND SOLUTIONS, TOO

The hospitality industry eliminated 212,600 positions in 2023 from 2019 levels. Still, 82% of U.S. hoteliers say they're looking for staff, and restaurants need more than 64,000 workers to achieve full staffing levels.

It's an issue that led 72% of hospitality industry respondents to HUB's survey to say has affected their organizations' vitality, resulting in a strong focus on recruiting by more than half.

One way to boost the success of those efforts is through benefits that are highly personalized and create quality employee experiences. By developing an in-depth picture of individual employees' needs and wants, hospitality employers can differentiate themselves in a competitive job market. Younger workers, for example, might be less interested in expensive health insurance, but prefer to increase access to mental health counseling and telehealth services. Older workers might prioritize prescription drug benefits and retirement programs.

Ultimately, though, focusing on employee well-being in general pays off – and not just in improved recruiting and retention. Nearly 85% of HR leaders cited better benefits as the way to lower recruiting costs and sick days, and improve employee satisfaction.

## PREPAREDNESS FOR THE NEXT DISASTER

Risks – acts of God or man – challenge the industry's resiliency. COVID-19 imparted hard lessons about the importance of risk management and the impact of sound practices on their operations.

But preparing for the next risk can be problematic, especially as serious weather disruptions become more common and more devastating. The hospitality industry can expect property insurance rates to rise as much as 20% in 2024; rates for catastrophic (CAT) perils in high-risk zones may rise by 70%.

One more manageable risk is liquor liability in an era of nuclear verdicts for overserving inebriated customers, which calls for more rigorous training and oversight. In the short term, liquor liability coverage is expected to rise by as much as 20%. Meanwhile excess coverage is expected to increase similarly, and getting limits covered by a single insurer will be difficult. Also under pressure will be employment-practices liability insurance



as insurers add wage-and-hour exclusions and reduce limits in response to growing class-action litigation.

Resorts, hotels, or restaurant chains with positive loss history – particularly those located in CAT-prone areas – may benefit from joining a captive. Captives give access to insurance capacity that would be otherwise difficult to obtain. In addition, companies participating in a captive are entitled to share in any underwriting profits.

**PROTECTING PROPERTIES AGAINST WHAT MAY COME**

Extreme weather – wind, rain, heat, fire – all pose a threat to restaurant, hotel, and resort properties, making aggressive risk management against growing exposures key for favorable renewals.

On one front, that means ensuring properties are maintained and exceed safety standards, like upgrading windows and roofs. But weather and disaster modeling

can reduce vulnerabilities and be a positive at renewal. While some mitigation techniques like using geospatial intelligence to predict earthquake, wildfire, or flood vulnerability may seem prohibitively expensive, even adding simple measures such as water monitors – which insurers often distribute for free – will make properties a more attractive risk.

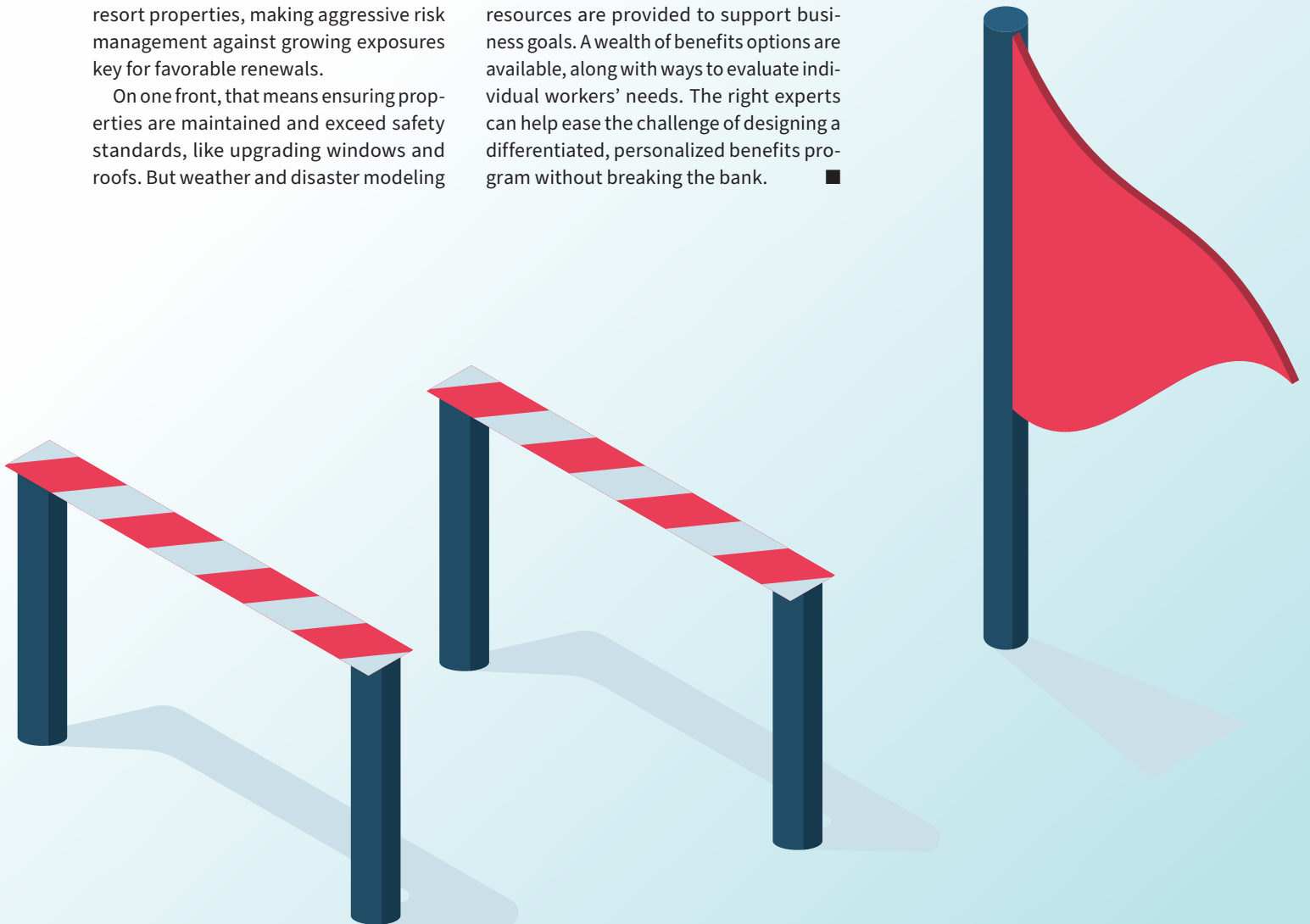
**PLAN FOR THE FUTURE**

It’s never too late to have a strategy in place that encompasses insurance, risk management, and a vital employee workplace.

An experienced broker will evaluate insurance programs for coverage limits and gaps and ensure risk management resources are provided to support business goals. A wealth of benefits options are available, along with ways to evaluate individual workers’ needs. The right experts can help ease the challenge of designing a differentiated, personalized benefits program without breaking the bank. ■



*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.*



# Finding the phonies

## Overcoming the rise in fake IDs

by TERRY SLATTERY

**W**HILE THE HOSPI-  
tality industry  
may not typically  
be thought of as the  
primary target for  
fraudsters, the hotel

business confronts a crucial challenge of staying ahead in the relentless race against fake ID fraud. Hotels, regardless of their size, face significant risks from revenue loss and reputational damage due to identity theft and the use of fake IDs. These risks encompass various challenges, including credit card chargebacks for room costs, sophisticated points fraud rings, and the potential misuse of hotel spaces for individuals operating under an alias.

With a surge in new ID formats, ranging from five to 20 each year in the U.S. alone, the competition against fraudulent documents has intensified. Additionally,

**FAKE**

Driver's License

AA 0123456789



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the inherent nature of the hotel industry often requires the reading and verification of identity documents from guests around the world. As technology advances, it fuels not only the creativity of fraudsters but also equips hotels with sophisticated tools for protection.

So, what are the complexities of this ongoing race and the pivotal role technology, particularly artificial intelligence, plays in navigating this ever-evolving landscape?

### WHAT HOTELS NEED TO BE AWARE OF

The rise in fake ID usage in hotels is more than a mere regulatory concern, it's a multifaceted threat affecting security, legal standing, and the overall guest experience.

Fake IDs can significantly undermine the safety of guests, exposing hotels to risks ranging from underage individuals accessing restricted areas to guests claiming to be someone they're not. Then there are more severe implications, like the loss of liquor licensure or fines due to non-compliance with identity verification laws.

The intersection of physical and digital identities, such as key card systems linked to specific guest profiles, accentuates the necessity for accurate identity validation. This is vital for managing access controls and maintaining security protocols, such as in emergencies like fire drills.

Ultimately, hotels aren't just service providers, they're custodians of their guests' well-being. Recognizing these challenges and verifying each guest's identity is the first step toward fortifying the industry against this costly type of fraud.

### ADVANCEMENTS IN TECHNOLOGY

The evolving landscape of fake IDs presents a unique challenge where technology plays a dual role – as both the enabler of sophisticated fraud and the key to its detection.

Continuous technology innovation has paved the way for more advanced forms of identification, making it increasingly

difficult to distinguish genuine from fraudulent. Fortunately, as the complexity of fake IDs grows, so does the capability of technology to detect them. Modern ID verification systems employ a variety of techniques, including biometric analysis, and examining IDs against sophisticated AI-powered templates that meticulously analyze an ID's physical characteristics right down to individual pixels. These systems also scrutinize security elements visible only under ultraviolet and infrared light, ensuring the verification of document authenticity.

In this technological race, AI emerges as a critical tool for hotels, not just in reacting to the threat of fake IDs, but in proactively staying ahead of it. With AI, hotels can quickly and accurately verify identities, reducing the reliance on manual checks and minimizing the risk of human error, making it an invaluable asset in the fight against fake ID fraud. Additionally, identity verification enhances security, eliminating the need for physical photocopies of IDs, which traditionally present privacy and security risks for guests. By embracing these technological advancements, hotels can enhance their security protocols and provide a safer, more reliable service to their guests.

### HOW HOTELS CAN MITIGATE AGAINST FAKE ID USAGE

Establishing rigorous ID verification processes is a critical first step in grappling with the escalating challenge of fake IDs. Hotels must not only equip their staff with the skills to detect these but also make them aware of the legal ramifications of failing to identify such deceptions. This proactive stance is essential in safeguarding the hotel's reputation and compliance with regulatory standards.

The integration of advanced ID scanning technology, powered by AI and machine learning, significantly strengthens a hotel's ability to recognize counterfeit documents. This technological leverage not only enhances security measures but also relieves the staff from the overwhelming



The evolving landscape of fake IDs presents a unique challenge where technology plays a dual role – as both the enabler of sophisticated fraud and the key to its detection.”

pressure of fraud detection, allowing them to redirect their focus towards providing guests with great service.

Despite these advancements, technology is only part of the solution. Staff training plays a critical role in ensuring that personnel are equipped with the knowledge and skills to support these technological systems. Regular training sessions on the latest fake ID trends and the capabilities of detection technology are vital in maintaining a vigilant staff.

The hotel industry's struggle against fake ID fraud is a testament to the ongoing rally between technological advancement and fraudulent activities. Remember, in the race against fake ID fraud, it's not just about keeping pace with the fraudsters; it's about staying one step ahead. By leveraging AI's advanced capabilities and ensuring regular staff training, hotels can create a more secure and trustworthy environment for their guests. ■



Terry Slattery is CEO of IDScan.net and is a technology industry veteran with more than 35 years of experience leading and growing SaaS businesses. He served as the president of ForRent.com for 30 years, growing the platform into one of the largest digital apartment marketplaces in the country. ForRent.com was acquired by Apartments.com, a subsidiary of the CoStar Group (NASDAQ: CSGP) in 2018.

# Serving up connections

The SLPS Gaam Volleyball Tournament & National Expo scores big in networking opportunities

by JODI SCOTT



**A**AHOA WAS HONORED TO RETURN AS A SPONSOR of the Surti Leuva Patidar Samaj (SLPS) Gaam Volleyball Tournament & National Expo 2024, held earlier this spring in Dallas, TX. AAHOA took part to educate people on the importance of advocacy and representation in the hospitality industry.

The all-day volleyball tournament featured 252 teams from across the United States, representing their Gaam (village) from Surat, India. Some 7,500 people took part including players, spectators, and vendors.

AAHOA representatives who attended include Chairman Miraj S. Patel, Vice Chairman Kamallesh (KP) Patel, Treasurer Rahul Patel, Immediate Past Chairman Bharat Patel, and North Texas Regional Director Dhiren Masters.

The mission of the National Gaam Volleyball Tournament is to facilitate networking, promote brotherhood, have competitive fun on the court, and enjoy the company of friends, family, and business networks.

The event is overseen by SLPS, which is a nonprofit religious, cultural, and non-political organization to provide a forum for meeting, facilitating, and encouraging religious observance, sharing ideas, providing cultural programs, and endeavoring toward community advancement.

This is not the first time AAHOA Members have gathered on opposite sides of the net to “network” and support a common cause. A couple of years ago, AAHOA Members used a volleyball competition with 37 teams as an opportunity to support local causes through the Asian American Sports Club of San Diego. In 2022, AAHOA hosted its inaugural volleyball tournament, bringing together 30 teams and 200 players. ■





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# AAHOA MEMBERS IN ACTION



Click the QR code for a special video AAHOA produced in recognition of Women's History Month earlier this year.



AAHOA Member Jan Gautam, President & CEO of IHRMC, hosted Congressman Darren Soto (D-FL 9th District) for a back-of-the-house tour at Gautam's Marriot property in Orlando, FL.

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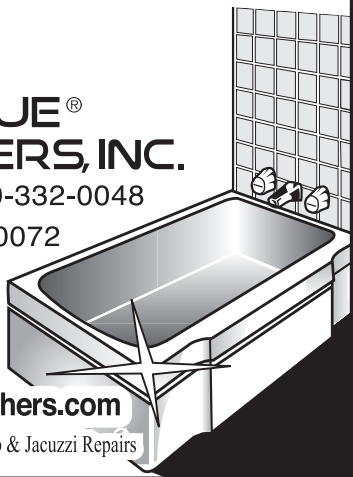
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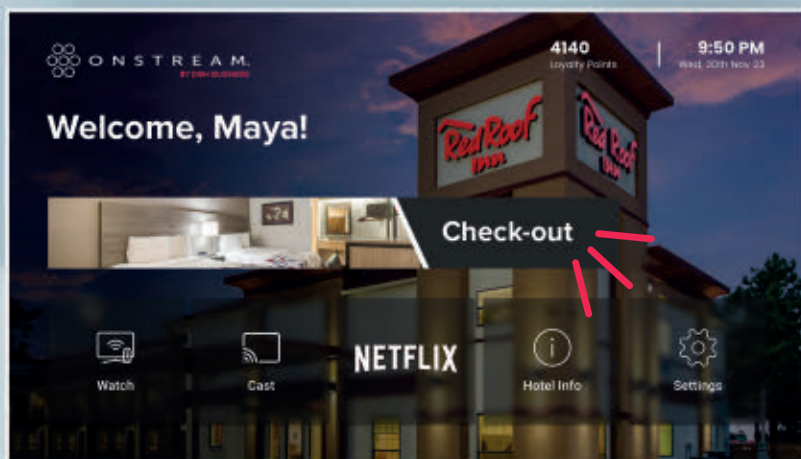
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