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For hotels, COVID-19 has created an operational "perfect storm"

By Katherine Grass - Optii (<https://www.optiisolutions.com/hotel-platform>) | October 2, 2020

The challenges facing the hospitality sector continue to be remarkable. The macro picture is best described as volatile. Countries have seen lockdowns eased just to find things shutting down again with little warning.

As recovery starts in some regions, hotels are reporting dramatic and unexpected spikes in occupancy numbers, swinging from 20% to 80% occupancy and back down to 20% in a matter of days.

The guest profile of businesses is changing too in many instances. Many business travel hotels are having to work out how to pivot to attract and profitably service leisure guests in the absence of a business travel market currently.

On top of the basic need to have the right amount of staff in place for a highly unpredictable amount and type of guests, hotels also have to process systemic change in the way their operations run to be able to guarantee the care of their staff and their guests. Surgical precision also needs to be applied to cost control.

The demands of managing operations in this environment, to keep everyone safe as well as the wheels of the hotel turning and up to expected standards cannot be underestimated. A very significant majority of hotels still use a pen and paper to manage their operations, so all of these changes are having incredibly dramatic effects on the day-to-day requirements of operations staff. Many hotels are running on skeleton teams, and managers are having to multitask, sometimes doing the cleaning themselves to stay on track.

The operational implications of the new cleaning protocols

One of the biggest challenges for operations managers and housekeepers alike is in implementing the new cleaning protocols. Extra time needs to be planned per hotel room to make sure that the right processes are followed, and the correct manpower needs to be available to execute the new protocols adequately for the number of rooms in service.

Some hotels are also deploying cleaning techniques that require rooms to be left for three hours after spraying, others have a policy of allocating 24 hours per room before another guest can be checked in to ensure there is time to fulfill the new procedures.



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Katherine Grass

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Over hundreds of rooms, this is a massive logistical challenge akin to a sophisticated project management job that consultants with years of experience are brought in to manage in other sectors. Particularly when the stakes are this high.

To understand more about how these new requirements are playing out across hotels and resorts in practice, we spoke to 13 mid-range hotels based in United States and Asia Pacific that have 100 rooms or more. From this we have charted the average room cleaning times in November 2019 and compared this to the pandemic cleaning environment in July 2020.

We found that the average guest departure room cleaning time has increased by around 11% overall. In fact, over half of the hotels we spoke to report an increase in minutes spent cleaning each room of at least 15% or more. Ivaylo Ivanov, senior vice president of hotel operations for Okada Manila, estimates that at his 5-star resort, an additional 25% to 30% time is required to clean each room.

Craig Coughlin, CEO of LUXXE, the outsourced housekeeping company based in Australia, commented that: "We have seen some departure cleaning times increase as much as 25% in serviced apartment style properties with full kitchen facilities, balconies and extensive minibars; the more touch points, the longer it takes to clean, disinfect and sanitize."

Determining the room cleaning rota is now also far more complex and can also double the amount of expensive management time to the morning administration and allocation process. The process then needs to be constantly updated as new rooms become available and need to be cleaned through the day, particularly if hotels have hibernated floors and reduced the pool of usually available rooms.

There is no doubt though that the relationship between correctly understanding and allocating enough time for each room to be guaranteed clean, and therefore safe, has a direct correlation with that hotels ability to attract guests back. Confidence in a robust approach is also central to being able to defend the credibility of the hotel if a new outbreak is linked to a particular hotel or its staff.

Balancing the costs

Expense control pressures are increasing as the costs of these operations continue to spiral with hotels having to outlay hundreds of thousands of dollars on new cleaning products and protective equipment. Ivaylo has assessed the additional cleaning supplies, PPE and additional guest safety amenities alone have increased operational expenses for Okada Manila by 15% to 25%. The wages needed to cover the new cleaning protocols are additional to this.

With supplementary costs like these to balance against occupancy rates of 20% on average, hotels have to find sophisticated ways to save on costs that won't compromise the all-important guest experience.

The demands on the housekeeper to manage a lean operation with increased cleaning requirements and management complexities puts the pressure on. Even with the assistance of technology, these processes can be hard to manage. How do you accurately forecast required labor resources on a given day? How do you ensure that workloads are evenly balanced? How do you most effectively distribute labor hours to ensure the most efficient use of time? The challenge is the same as before the crisis, but the pressure has increased exponentially.

We expected hotels to turn to a reduction in stayover cleans as a key way to balance out the additional time spent cleaning check-out stays. However, our survey found that only 12% of the hotels we have spoken to have actually gone down this route.

As a five-star resort where guests know to expect exemplary service, Iyaylo at the Okada resort just simply does not feel this option is open to them as standard (although, if guests request it, that would of course be accommodated). Indeed, where guests do want stayover cleans, the hotels we surveyed found that cleaning time significantly increases by around 35%.

It's complex, so what next?

When all the strings of the current environment for operations staff are pulled together, it is easy to see that not only have their jobs fundamentally shifted but that there is a huge amount expected of them. Technology has played a vital role in helping teams to communicate and operate during the lockdown, and it will be even more essential to equip teams with the right tools in this next stage so that hotel operations can be optimized to the maximum and these key members of the team are properly supported.

Now is the time to assess each process to gain a full picture of exactly what labor and time is needed to continue to operate at the level guests expect whilst adapting to the regulations of the new normal.

Any investment made now to support this essential part of any hotel will pay dividends in terms of lowering staff turnover and increasing guest satisfaction as well as realizing business-critical cost savings.

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