




## Smart training tools that get employees engaged

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By [HOTELS Contributing Editor](#) on 2/21/2018

A hotel employee can be taught how to run a front desk. F&B workers can learn on the job the best way to serve customers. Housekeepers can be trained in how a particular room should be cleaned. Harder to teach is how to smile, be accommodating and act on an instinctive sense of making travelers feel welcomed and at ease in their surroundings – the hospitality at the heart of the hotel.

With more hotels hiring for attitude, what are the best ways to train staffers with polished soft skills who need technical and operational know-how? There are several methods that work best, including the increasing use of online learning and shadowing. (And read the sidebar on role-playing.)

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*Contributed by Laura Koss-Feder*

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“Providing effective training is a proven strategy to reduce employee turnover and ultimately results in a more efficient, productive and engaged workforce,” says Gareth Fox, McLean, Virginia-based vice president of human resources-Americas at Hilton.

In fact, e-learning, offered through short, easy-to-follow videos and virtual reality mechanisms, is predicted to rapidly increase as a form of training over the next five years.

### **Training challenges**

There are some challenges: It can be difficult for new employees to understand how different departments of a hotel depend on one another, says Donna Quadri-Felitti, Marvin Ashner director and associate professor at the School of Hospitality Management at Pennsylvania State University. For instance, a housekeeper in training needs to learn more than the very important tasks involved in cleaning a room; he or she needs to learn how the housekeeping department and its work relate to other aspects of hotel operation, and how performance can impact that, Quadri-Felitti adds.

Another issue is the language barrier faced by some trainees, says Nancy Curtin Morris, vice president of learning at Atlanta-based Hotel Equities, which has 65 properties. If training is effective and actually helps improve employees' life skills – such as teaching them the local language of the hotel – they will be more connected to the property, feel cared for and want to stay longer on the job, says Kara Lundgren, general manager of the 111-room Circ Hotel, which opens in March in Hollywood, Florida.



Training also should take into account different generations of employees – from younger millennials just out of school to older workers who may be making a career switch to hospitality. It can be challenging to balance different approaches to training younger and older workers.

“Younger staffers, in particular, need to be inspired with fun activities and experiential learning,” says Richard Hatter, general manager of the 262-room Hotel Icon in Kowloon, Hong Kong. The property offers scavenger hunts onsite and in the surrounding area during orientation. Older employees are invited to share their work histories and stories with younger trainees.

## **Digital experiences**

While widespread use of technology in training is still a few years away, online learning tools are being utilized. But it needs to be done in short increments to avoid “e-learning fatigue” and for the information to sink in, says Josh Haims, principal in human capital at Deloitte Consulting. “You can’t open up an online catalog that will take 45 minutes or an hour to go through,” he says.

Some of these innovations that will be a future component of training will include virtual classrooms. Hilton has begun using VR goggles to offer a business immersion experience for trainees that covers the entire hotel environment, from the front desk to kitchen to housekeeping and more, says Blaire Bhojwani, Hilton’s senior director of learning innovation. Two hundred employees, working in small groups, have tried the goggles as part of a pilot program.

“People want small, bite-sized learning that is very relevant to them and their needs, and they want the training when it’s convenient for them – which is another reason why the VR training is proving so successful,” Bhojwani says.

The use of mobile applications to train new employees also is on the rise. Since May 2017, Hotel Equities’ properties have been using an interactive app that utilizes trivia games, Morris says. The mobile-ready platform can train front desk associates, F&B and back of house staff, housekeeping and maintenance personnel. Trivia games feature five questions at a time that last for just 43 seconds. Participants earn points for correct answers that can be traded in for gift cards, donations to charities, pizza parties and other prizes.

“When you have a new hire, you don’t want to bombard them with too much information. Our employees can use (the app) three times when it is good for them,” says Lacey Green, guest services manager at the 130-room Hotel Indigo in Athens, Georgia. Her hotel’s 60 employees have been using the since June 2017.

## **Shadowing**

Salt Hotels partnered younger and older new staffers together to shadow each other when it opened the 110-room Asbury Hotel in Asbury Park, New Jersey, in 2016, says David Bowd, New York City-based founder and CEO of the four-property company. It was done as part of an initiative called the Salt School, a 10-week, 25-hour intensive introduction to all facets of the hospitality industry that launched with the debut of this property.

“The staffers would really have each other’s back, without a level of competition,” Bowd notes. “They were very supportive of one another and there was almost a motherly or fatherly relationship that really benefited both parties.”

Before staffers can shadow one another, they need to know what the property is about. “You have to train people on the unique story of your hotel, so they understand what is different or special about this property,” Bowd adds.

The Asbury is designed to be inviting to the local community; residents can bring their pets into the lobby, which also offers workspaces. The staff has been trained to be welcoming to those who are just hanging out there, even if they aren’t guests, Bowd says. All 160 employees also have visited local shops and attractions so that they could get a feel for the neighborhood and offer recommendations to guests. The result: a 90% employee retention rate.

Shadowing can start from day one. Employees who are trained at Concord Hospitality’s 95 properties receive the name of a “buddy” or mentor that they will shadow when they receive a job offer letter, says Debra Punke, senior vice president of human capital. Shadowing comprises 80% of their two-week training.

“If you don’t use something immediately, you lose it,” Punke says. “With shadowing, you can ask questions as you are learning the job and it will stick with you. What doesn’t work is sitting by yourself and watching a video with no follow-up.”