

COMMENTARY SERIES ON INDUSTRY TRANSFORMATION MAPS

A COLLABORATION BETWEEN CHANNEL NEWSASIA AND
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You've heard about the Industry Transformation Maps, but not sure how you or your company can be part of the transformation journey? A series of commentary pieces penned by industry representatives will offer interesting insights on industry trends, and share experiences about how they have overcome challenges and captured opportunities to transform themselves and be future-ready.

Kick-starting this series is the spotlight on the hotel industry, contributed by Mr Aung Kyaw Moe, Director of IT, Asia at Millennium Hotels and Resorts. The article discussed what the future of the hotel industry could look like, and how robots can relieve workers from the menial tasks and focus more on interacting with guests to provide greater service. Read more below for the article.

COMMENTARY: INTRODUCING ROBOTS IN HOTELS IN SINGAPORE IS A GOOD IDEA

Automation in hotels doesn't mean that robots will take away jobs from workers, says a hotel technology expert.

By Aung Kyaw Moe (first published on CNA Online on 21 May 2017)



A robot can bring you almost anything you need at this hotel, including fresh towels. (Photo: Millennium Hotels and Resorts)

SINGAPORE: The hotel of the future in Singapore might look something like this - guests will be able to check in online ahead of arrival. A robot will serve them pre-ordered drinks, take their luggage up to their room and deliver room service orders. Room entry will probably be keyless, using a smartphone app.

As incredible as this sounds, we are already seeing parts of this futuristic fantasy materialise in hotels today. Here in Singapore, the hotel industry has taken steps towards automation, which will enhance the guest experience and lift productivity.

This shift is part of the Hotel Industry Transformation Map, an initiative developed and implemented by STB in partnership with the Singapore Hotel Association, Food, Drinks and Allied Workers Union and the Hotel Sectoral Tripartite Committee.

The roadmap aims to accelerate business transformation and forge a competitive industry supported by a future-ready workforce for sustainable growth.

PRESSING MANPOWER CRUNCH

Automation will boost productivity by freeing up hotel staff from basic tasks, giving them room to focus on interaction with guests. The manpower crunch is pressing. As more visitors arrive in Singapore, new hotels are being built to cope with the demand and this in turn increases competition for the same labour pool. Visitor arrivals reached a record high of 16.4 million in 2016, a 7.7 per cent increase over the previous year, and this number is expected to grow further. Automation is therefore critical for hotels to sustain profitability.

NO FEARS THAT ROBOTS WILL TAKE AWAY JOBS

The pessimistic view that robots will take jobs away from workers is exaggerated, in my opinion. Automation will complement our work, by relieving staff of menial jobs and allowing them to interact with guests. Being able to deliver quality service is what will draw job seekers to our industry, even as we face rising living costs, an ageing population that is exiting the industry and a younger, better-educated workforce that is shunning basic service-level jobs.



Robots like AURA can also bring you chilled water, direct to your door. (Photo: Millennium Hotels and Resorts)

At M Social Hotel, guests and staff have cheered the arrival of AURA, the first guest-facing robot in Singapore's hotel industry that delivers items like bottled water, towels, toiletries and packed meals. She can autonomously ride elevators, navigate to a guest's room and announce her arrival by calling the room's phone. AURA can make late-night deliveries to female guests, avoiding potential discomfort that may stem from meeting male staff. At peak periods, robots like AURA can help with the workloads of front office, housekeeping and food and beverage departments.

Automation is one of many innovative new ideas to tackle the industry's pain points - there are also other areas such as big data, robotics, analytics and material sciences.

In the future, hotels will have to work with solution providers who can energise our industry with their savvy and innovation. We will look to them to help address common pain points such as speeding up room cleaning, laundry management processes and enhancing labour productivity in general.

HOTELS CAN CONNECT WITH GUESTS ON DEEPER LEVEL

Yet, while robots can bear back-breaking loads, they can never replicate the personal touch, warm smile or listening ear of a fellow human.

Automation frees up time for our staff to anticipate guest needs, and engage them on a deeper level. It means that guests have someone to talk to, listen to them and care for their needs.

We have found that our guests, especially those under 35, greatly enjoyed AURA, as they understand that AURA's aim is to cut waiting time and improve efficiency. During a period surveyed by our team, we found that AURA's average time for a delivery to a guest was consistently about three minutes, compared to a human delivery time of about five minutes.

We have also begun to automate in other areas, both in front and back office. For instance, we have installed a system to schedule room distribution for cleaning and alert staff of tasks. Another example is a kiosk that manages the breakfast queue and can enable self-service orders.

ALL OVER THE WORLD

Robots have started appearing in hotels all over the world, not just in Singapore. In Asia, there is the space-themed, robot-staffed Pengheng Space capsule hotel in China, as well as the Henn Na hotel in Japan, which has receptionist bots who can speak English, Japanese, Chinese, and Korean. Some hotels in the USA, such as the West Wing boutique hotel in Florida State, are using AURA's siblings, also sourced from the American tech firm Savioke. Interestingly, two of these three countries are facing an ageing population and changing workforce, similar to Singapore.



The front desk at Henn Na hotel in Nagasaki is served by robots that can help guests check in or check out. (Source: Henn Na hotels)

UNLOCK INSIGHTS FROM DATA

Personalisation is the future that hotels look to. We want to personalise the guest experience down to the finest detail, empowered by technology such as automation and analytics, given the wealth of data available on individuals today. Some of this data will come from robots, who can gather information on customer satisfaction, response and purchase patterns through their interaction with guests.

In the future, they will serve as a vital tool to unlock data-driven insights, just like how today, they have become our means to unshackle the hotel industry from its labour and resource constraints.

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