



Bed, Breakfast and Wi-Fi

Are you somebody who needs to work on the move? Do you have to keep logging into your intranet to check out various dashboards, check mail every fifteen minutes, or conduct voice conferences, irrespective of which part of the world you are in? The Indian hospitality industry is gearing up to meet your technology needs.

It is 8:00 a.m. and you have just reached another city to meet a client regarding a new project. 8:30 a.m. You are at the hotel. Before the meeting at 10:30 a.m., you need to fine tune the PowerPoint or OpenOffice presentation. You need to log in to your company's Virtual Private Network (VPN) to retrieve some files, then you need to check out the Business Process Management (BPM) dashboards and delegate the day's tasks. You also have a voice conference scheduled over Skype for 9:00 a.m. And yes, you have to e-mail your wife and tell her you reached safely. It is 8:45 a.m. and you realize the GPRS facility on your cell phone has gone kaput! Panic. Reluctantly you go to the reception and ask them if there is a cyber café nearby. Within moments you have a rented Access Card and are connected to the hotel's Wireless LAN, using your laptop. A high five for Wi-Fi!

The Indian hospitality industry is

indeed gearing up to meet the technology needs of their guests. On another plane, the hotels themselves are embracing IT for better management.

Online reservation

Tirupur is a high intensity garment manufacturing and exporting centre in Tamilnadu. Almost throughout the year, and especially during trade fairs, buyers from all over the world, flock to the town. How does a person from Germany book a hotel room? Now, apart from airplane and train tickets, you can even book hotel rooms online. Velan Hotels Tirupur, for instance, lets guests book rooms and receive confirmation over the Internet.

Many 3, 4- and 5-star hotels in India have opened Web portals through which you can explore the various facilities offered by the hotel, check the vacancies of various types of rooms and make bookings online. Some even let you select your preferences regarding

your daily newspaper.

This online booking facility links to the hotel's Central Reservation System that keeps track of bookings made from all sources at the hotel, by travel agents, through the Internet, etc., so that room allocation can be optimised.

Guest Management System

Starred hotels in India usually have a comprehensive Guest Management System (GMS), right from the front office. This system stores all details about guests—when they check in and check out, when they would like their rooms cleaned, which rooms they prefer, the newspaper they'd like to read, complete billing details including room charges, restaurant bills, telephone and Internet charges, and more.

In fact, hotels use the GMS to keep track of regular guests. So, don't be surprised if a chocolate cake and a birthday card land at your doorstep, courtesy of your favourite hotel!

Electronic key cards

Those metallic plates or smart cards that are attached to your keys, don't just turn the power supply on or off. They are actually connected to a computer network. Based on the key card which is inserted into the slot, the Information System can verify whether it is the guest's key or the key used by the housekeeping department or the duplicate. Based on this, the hotel can keep track of when you entered or left the room, when the

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SUPRABHAT CHATTERJEE
National Business Development Manager,
Cisco Systems
(India & SAARC)

The hospitality industry demands seamless and uninterrupted connectivity; hence a robust network is a primary requirement. Cutting edge networking technology is now being deployed to enhance customer satisfaction. Hotels now offer instant Internet connectivity that is widely used by business travellers. Advanced technologies such as Wireless LAN, Wi-Fi and IP telephony have become critical components of the hospitality industry.

Some of the challenges faced by hotels are

as follows:

- **24x7 operations:** The hospitality industry requires 24x7 operational services. Hence, it is of paramount importance for hotel owners to have a dedicated and qualified IT infrastructure management team that can rectify technical snags instantly.
- **Operational costs:** Deployment of various technologies involves huge operational costs. Hotels are looking at ways in which they can reduce their operational costs without compromising on the quality of the services
- **Security:** Since a majority of Indian hotels have been automated and networked through LAN & WAN networks, security is an important parameter to be considered. Setting up a stringent security policy helps to check internal and external security breaches.”

room was last cleaned, etc. Also the key in the slot conveys the fact that you are present to the computer system that manages air conditioning and boiler operations, for instance.

Food and Beverage Management

Restaurants, bars and kitchens are extremely important and high-interaction areas in a hotel. Even in a crowded restaurant, I am sure you would not like it if the bearer brought

you chocolate ice cream instead of your order for a dark chocolate gâteau. You do expect precise and quick delivery of orders and accurate preparation of bills.

These are handled through Kitchen Order Ticket Management Systems or Point of Sales Systems for food and beverage. Basically, when you place an order, the bearer notes it down and feeds it into a computer. This order is automatically transmitted to the kitchen (yes, the kitchen! Computers are no longer confined to the managers' rooms), where it is prepared. When the food is checked out of the kitchen, the computer is updated. Ultimately, once you are done with your meal, the bill is prepared. If you are staying at the same hotel, this will be automatically compounded with your total bill. No more communication gaps and order errors.

Such a POS System for food and beverage helps the restaurant to fine tune the menu, as they get a clear idea about what customers prefer. Moreover, it also helps study yield management,



and optimises the purchase of groceries and other materials.

High-speed Internet connections
While Internet connectivity was once a differentiating factor that gave hotels a competitive advantage, today it is a necessity. If you were visiting a city for a conference, I am sure the first thing you would ask before checking into a hotel would be whether or not they had an Internet/ PC facility to check your e-mail. Hotels usually charge on an hourly basis for this service. Or if they provide a connection at your room itself, to hook up your laptop and work, they may charge on a duration or download basis.

Since high-speed Internet is now a common feature, hotels seeking to provide an extra something for their guests are going in for wireless connectivity. They set up a wireless LAN in their campus and provide the guests with the option of renting Access Cards, so that they can stay connected even when they are waiting for their dinner at the restaurant or relaxing at the poolside. Hotels like Hotel Golkonda, Hyderabad; Hotel Green Park, Hyderabad, Vishakapatnam and Chennai; Velan Hotels Ltd., Tirupur,

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MURALI RAO
Managing Director,
Zerobase Electronics (P)
Ltd., a medium-sized
enterprise located in
Chennai

My work entails that I am connected to the Internet wherever I go, to check e-mail, browse the Internet and also to log in to our server site to work on reports. Today, most hotels offer Internet facilities as a paid service, but some also offer free Internet. However, since we carry laptops, it is also possible to connect to the Internet through telephone lines, using a dial-up connection.

Security is not much of an issue since most hotels have a firewall installed, and we do have a personal firewall installed on our machine too. For greater convenience, hotels should provide wireless connectivity, since most laptop users are tech savvy and would like to relax and work inside the room after a hard day of work. If wireless connectivity is offered guests can actually have their computers on their laps and use it!”

ITC Maurya Sheraton, New Delhi; Holiday Inn, Mumbai and Goa; Ramanashree Hotel in Bangalore; and Taj Bengal, Kolkata provide Wi-Fi Internet connectivity.

Before you connect using a hotel's network, it would be wise to find out if they have a firewall installed, especially if you are going to connect to your office's VPN.

Business rooms

Many hotels, especially those with convention centres have business

rooms, equipped with computers and projectors, which you can book and use for meetings or presentations.

Smart rooms

Smart rooms include functions such as key less entry, rooms that can map customer preferences for room temperature, preferred room lighting, food, TV/ video preferences, etc. This means you can experience the ultimate luxury in your hotel room. And makes you wonder if rooms have started developing a sixth sense too.

The Golkonda example

“Hotels, particularly those targeting business travellers, are aware of the guest's need to work on the move and are increasingly providing state-of-the-art technology to address those requirements. These services are being bundled together with other value add-ons through the concept of business lounges,” explains Ravinder Singh of Hotel Golkonda, Hyderabad.

The Golkonda, Hyderabad, provides Internet connectivity to its guests through the following methods:

- Wired Internet in the rooms—works on UTP cable.
- Wireless network (Wi-Fi)—works on Cisco Access Points in open areas like the lobby, coffee shop, boardroom, conference halls and premium rooms.

Guests can easily connect to the Internet and access their e-mails, surf the Net, and also connect to their office VPN even while staying at the hotel.

They add value by providing technical help to guests in solving minor IT related problems including minor hardware anomalies, trouble shooting with Internet connectivity, and even operating system related problems.

They provide Wi-Fi (Wireless Internet) connectivity in the boardrooms so guests can conduct online interviews and conferences with overseas clients.

They use the Fortune Enterprise V3.3 ERP Package developed by IDS Software Pvt. Ltd. for Front Office Management, House Keeping, Point of Sale, Sales & Marketing, Banquet Hall Booking, Telephone Management and an Inventory, Finance and Payroll System.



Hotel Management

So far we have seen technology that is visible and reaches you directly. In addition to these, hotels also use technology extensively to manage their operations. A well-managed hotel translates into a comfortable stay and better economics for the guests. So, let's also take a brief look at IT systems working behind the scenes, in hotels.

Beyond front-office management systems that provide real-time information about occupancy and guest related information, like any business organisation, hotels also use Accounting Systems, Management Information Systems (MIS), Property and Asset Management Systems and Yield Management Systems.

In addition, hotels have Centralised Reservation Systems (CRS) and Energy Management Systems (EMS). In most hotels, these are linked. Energy Management is extremely important in 5-star and heritage hotels with sprawling campuses. Imagine a hotel with around 250 rooms. At an off-season period, only a quarter of these rooms are likely to be occupied. Why should all the boilers and air-conditioners (and other energy consuming devices) work at full-steam?

Therefore, the CRS and the EMS work closely, to allocate rooms in an optimised fashion, so that the operating intensity of the boilers and air-conditioners can be modulated depending on the rooms allocated. Other factors such as security and ease of service will also influence this optimal allocation pattern.

Another popular application for Information Systems in hotels is Call Accounting. This system keeps track of telephone calls, Internet charges, etc. Then, hotels also use an integrated system for fire alarms, vigilance, security, and so on.

Adoption of such technologies helps the management with real-time monitoring and control of various aspects like expense and collection at various departments, occupancy

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MR GAUTAM
Executive Director, Velan
Hotels Ltd., Tirupur and
Coonoor, Tamilnadu

We maintain a detailed database on guest history, where we keep track of the guests' preferences for certain rooms and we try our best to allocate their preferences. Although this is not entirely built into the system, out front office uses this information. In most cases we do not require regular guests to fill in the registration card, as these are already stored in the system.

“Analysis of stored information about guests' spending patterns is another aspect, as this helps us ensure that the guests' interests are highlighted in their physical surroundings. The Point-of-Sale system at the restaurant helps trace and track a guest's tastes and preferences, seating pattern, choice of outlet, and so on.

These points are really highlighted in Velan Hotels because 90 per cent or more of our customers are repeat guests who are familiar with our staff, and vice versa.”

details, payment, etc., and in the study of seasonal patterns, guest demographics and so on. Ultimately these help the hotels to serve you better.

If you wish to know about the recent technology adoption by Indian hotels, check out HVS International <http://www.hvsinternational.com>.

Almost there

It's worth knowing about some of the technology related trends in International hospitality because it is only a matter of time before Indian hotels adopt these too. In fact, some hotel chains have already adopted technology on par with their international counterparts, but in the course of time, the adoption will be more widespread.

Smart kiosks. These allow automatic check-in and check-out. Guests coming into a hotel just have to identify themselves with a smart card or their credit card and they can check in through a user-friendly computer interface that allots their room, accepts their preferences, and gives them directions to their room. No more waits after a gruelling day at work. They just have to go to their room and swipe the card again, and they are in. For frequent guests, the computer system even stores details like preferred room temperature,

choice of music and T.V. channels, so as to provide a complete user experience. Similarly, when they check out, they just have to identify themselves again, their bills are all ready, then can pay with their credit card through a user-friendly computer interface, and zoom out.

Voice over IP. Hotels, the world over, are gearing up to provide their guests with the infrastructure for IP telephony. Experts recommend that hotels being built in India in the near future should prepare for VoIP even as the infrastructure is being built. For example, it would be wise to make provisions for a data cable near every telephone line so that IP telephony can easily be introduced later.

Second best, only to home

Not just 5-star hotels, even smaller hotels in India are embracing technology for more efficient management, and to provide their guests with a hassle free and delightful experience. It's good news for all those of you whose work entails a lot of travelling. Even though no hotel can ever measure up to home, with technological adoption they can at least assure you a comfortable stay. ■

—Janani Gopalakrishnan is a freelance writer and columnist based in Chennai. She writes on a variety of topics, her forte being business and technology.