Tech update:
MOVERS AND SHAKERS

Technology has revolutionised the hotel industry and the way hoteliers run their properties, making operations more seamless and helping to boost profits. We sit down with some key technology suppliers to find out how their offering has changed the industry

Improvements in technology have not only changed the way people live their lives, they have changed how business owners operate their company as well as revolutionising consumer expectations. This is no different for the hospitality industry, and while hoteliers have to put great work into meeting the demands of tuned-in guests - through in-room entertainment, free WiFi and new technologies such as concierge apps - they are also able to use technology to improve the operational running of their business, drive additional revenue streams, and broaden their appeal.

There's no doubt that the hotel industry has vastly changed with the inception of new technologies. Large hotel chains are pushing the boundaries when it comes to guest experience technologies, forcing the independent hotelier to improve their offering or risk losing guests. As a result, hotel guests will continue to demand ever more comprehensive experiences as we move into the future.

Recent examples of large companies pushing the envelope include the introduction of online check-ins by Edwardian Hotels London, Montcalm Hotels' free smartphone service, a 'robot room service' from InterContinental Hotels Group (IHG) and even a "top secret" experiment from Aloft Hotels, in which it plans to launch voice-activated hotel rooms where guests can control the technology in their rooms using Apple's Siri.

Bob Durie, managing director of North West Europe at Hoist Group, which supplies a vast range of technology products and services from high-speed internet, conference services, TV and content solutions and property management software (PMS), claims it's a "no-brainer" that technology has had a "huge impact" on the industry. "Starting from necessity of having reliable IT solutions and WiFi in your hotel, as well as ensuring guests have access to interesting content via TV, a growing market for 'bring your own device', and [hotel owners] involving more property management systems and applications into [their] daily operations."

For many hoteliers, there is a reluctance to embrace what may turn out to be a fad, or what is right now just a gimmick - a lot of what is being experimented with is a long way off becoming standard practice. But what about the basics? Hotel operations and the guest experience have changed massively over the past 20 years: hoteliers now use technology in all aspects of operating their properties while guests demand a home-away-from-home experience.

IN-ROOM ENTERTAINMENT
Many hotels make a success out of being a countryside retreat and a destination to 'get away from it all', but, for the most part, hotel guests expect the same level of technology and comfort, if not more so, than their homes. Why would a consumer visit a hotel that does not have WiFi, TV and other comforts that they could enjoy at their own home, without paying a fee?

This is where the hotelier's decision on in-room entertainment is crucial, especially when it comes to corporate travellers, and improving this aspect of a hotel can help a property appeal to a broader range of both leisure and business guests. Hotel guests now expect a hotel's in-room tech offering to better than what they would have at home. This means hoteliers are under increasing pressure to offer TVs, free WiFi, DAB radios, phones and new perhaps even hotel-branded apps with online concierge services as part of their package.

Offering these products, which are now so ingrained into our daily lives, can open up new markets, encourage guests to stay longer and more frequently, and, more importantly, offer something that goes above and beyond - or at least matches - the competitors in the local area. Companies such as Chantry Digital, a nationwide supplier of TVs for hotels and B&Bs, can help advise hoteliers who want to improve their offering on what TVs and packages would suit their property and market best. ➲

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PROPERTY MANAGEMENT

While guest expectations have changed, so has the way that many hoteliers are now operating their businesses. Long gone are the days of writing down the details of each guest with a pen and paper and inefficiently keeping track of the company's operations through various files and folders. Software systems have led to an enormous reduction in administrative tasks for hoteliers, bringing everything from reservations, guest details, food and beverage management, payroll, point-of-sale and more into one centralised location.

This has allowed hotel operators to easily see where they can be improving revenue, especially with the analytics and data harnessing tools many contemporary systems have. Sarah Cade, managing director of Avon Data, which has a property management system named Hotel Executive, says: "Advances in technology have changed the way hotels are run. Intelligent software, like Hotel Executive, means there is far less admin work for staff. It has boosted hotels' profitability because prices can be set to automatically alter for maximum yield on each room."

CLOUD-BASED SOFTWARE

Increasingly, hoteliers can access the management tools of their property while on the move. They are no longer required to manage their business while sitting in the confines of an office or staying put on the reception desk, and can spend more time greeting guests and moving around the hotel, as well as managing the business while away on holiday or on business trips.

Cloud-based software also means hoteliers no longer need to use bulky and expensive hardware, resulting in a cost (and space) saving. Rhys Swinburn, director at High Level Software, says: "Our system is cloud based. The advantages are well documented - hoteliers can access real-time data from anywhere in the world, from any device. The data is backed up, eliminating the need for hotels to have servers and 'heavy-duty' installs in their property. This easy deployment on our side means our costs are very competitive."

ONLINE BOOKINGS

OTAs and their huge marketing budgets have pushed the direct websites of independent hoteliers down the search engine rankings and a large portion of consumers now go straight to OTAs to book their rooms. Many hoteliers may not like the fact, but it is the new normal, and it is important that hotel owners can easily manage both direct and third party bookings.

Companies such as Eviivo supply an all-in-one booking suite, allowing hoteliers to easily take bookings from either their own website or from third party agents such as Expedia, Booking.com and LateRooms. Tom Messett, head of marketing at Eviivo, says: "Our customers (all small accommodation providers) have grown their businesses by 18% on average, with their average daily rate up 10% and online bookings up 26%. We give hoteliers control over their online business but we also give them time to focus on other areas of their business, their guests and their service, because they're not wasting the whole day doing admin online."

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ADDITIONAL REVENUE

Independent businesses are always on the lookout for ways to increase revenue, and this is no different for hoteliers. Whether it is to increase staff wages, invest back into the property or to simply boost profitability, hotel owners have been able to capitalise on innovations in technology to improve their businesses. More traditional methods could include an improved food offering or encouraging guests into the hotel bar, but many hotels are now using digital car park portals to increase revenue streams.

Digital car park portals allow hoteliers to sell parking spaces in advance instead of the traditional 'arrive and park model', ensuring that all parking spaces are filled to maximise additional revenue for the business. Not only is this easier and more seamless for the hotel guest, but it also allows the hotel owner to sell unused spaces to anyone visiting the area. Martin Cleland-Pottie, CEO of BookaPark, says: "Hoteliers now have the opportunity to promote and manage their car parking spaces in the same way as their rooms, maximising a valuable asset that was previously difficult to promote."

These portals and apps not only increase revenue for the hotelier but also make parking cheaper for the consumer, meaning it's a win-win for both parties. This is backed up by BookaPark user Niek Mestadgh, operations manager at Copthorne Tara London Kensington, who comments the emergence of online parking via the various apps and websites in the UK has had a "very meaningful impact" on the hotel's revenue. "We are still seeing significant growth in this area and expect this to continue as we engage more platforms to distribute our car parks," he says.

GETTING INVOLVED

It can be a daunting proposition for independent hoteliers to make the step into improved technology, especially for those who are skeptical or are hesitant to make a change. However, once a hotelier makes the move, whether it is improving their back-of-house operations or upgrading their guest experience via technology, they are sure to reap the rewards. Rhys Swinburn at High Level Software adds: "It's a huge decision, it is all about trust. We know that one of the main barriers to sales is the hassle of switching from another system, or even coming from paper to what we do." As a result, the company has invested heavily in customer service to train hoteliers on how to the use technology, and says that 95% of queries are now answered within 10 seconds.

Taking the plunge into improved technology can seem intimidating at first glance, but once the move has been made,hoteliers can experience increased guest footfall, higher ratings on review websites, a more loyal clientele and, most importantly, a jump in revenues.

Supplier Listing: Avon Data
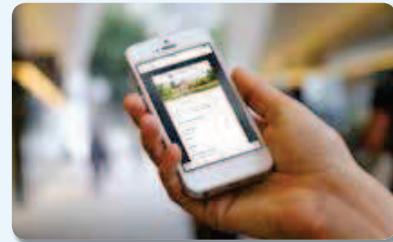
Avon Data has more than 30 years' expertise in developing hotel management software. The company was founded in 1986, by the son of a hotelier who set out to produce software solutions for every aspect of the hotel business. Its flagship product is its feature-rich property management system (PMS), Hotel Executive, which will support the back office and front-of-house operations of your hotel.
INFO: www.avondata.co.uk or sales@avondata.co.uk or 0330 223 1456

bookaPark

bookaPark was established in 2007, as a solution to some of the challenges of corporate parking. The company said it was one of the first cloud-based platforms, designed specifically for delivering services to car park managers and owners. From these innovative beginnings, bookaPark has grown into a leading solutions provider - for the big players to the smallest, and everyone in between.
INFO: www.bookapark.com or sales@bookapark.com

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Chantry Digital

Chantry Digital is a nationwide supplier of hospitality TVs, specialising in rental, purchase and lease of Samsung, LG, Toshiba and Philips hospitality TVs. Installed by its own team of bespoke installers, the company can supply small B&Bs up to large corporate hotels. Chantry Digital also installs the aerial receiving equipment for foreign, information and HD channels for hotel bedrooms.
INFO: neil@chantrydigital.co.uk or www.chantrydigital.co.uk

Clarity Hospitality

Clarity started life as Total Hospitality Solutions, which was founded in New Zealand in 1992 to create and provide application software, primarily to the hospitality industry. The company's software assists hotel staff and management with reservations, reception, floor services, restaurants services, event management and other hotel functions. Clarity aims to provide the best in hospitality application software with the functionality and high performance to meet the demanding needs of today's hospitality industry.
INFO: www.clarityhospitality.co.uk or 0330 043 0719

Eviivo

Eviivo was founded almost 10 years ago to help small hotels and B&Bs succeed online. The company brings together a team of people bursting with talent and experience with a mission to give customers innovative products

that make the lives of independent accommodation providers easier. Eviivo provides its customers with an all-in-one booking suite to make it simple for them to take bookings online, from their own website and from OTA's like Expedia, Booking.com and LateRooms.
INFO: www.eviivo.com or enquiries@eviivo.com or 0844 880 3000

High Level Software

High Level Software (HLS) is a cloud-based PMS, founded in Cardiff in 2013. The company has grown from five to 15 people and has recently entered a partnership with Zonal Retail Data Systems, which has acquired a majority share of the business. HLS said this will allow the company to accelerate its product development and add resource throughout the business. High Level Software offers an all-in-one solution, including an online booking engine, PMS and real-time channel manager.
INFO: www.high-level-software.com or 029 2035 1575 or info@high-level-software.com
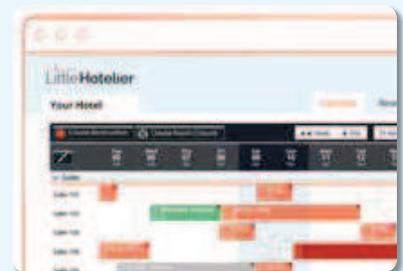
Hoist Group

Hoist Group is the complete hospitality partner for hotels, health care institutions and public operations. With more than 20 years - founded in 1994 - of proven hospitality experience, Hoist Group is the market leader in innovative high speed internet access, conference services, TV and content solutions, PMS and back-office software as well as other guest-facing amenities.
INFO: www.hoistgroup.com or info.uk@hoistgroup.com or 0207 348 6770

Little Hotelier

Little Hotelier is an all-in-one reservation and accommodation management solution built specifically for small accommodation providers. The Little Hotelier cloud-based package comes with a very smart and powerful channel manager, a commission free booking engine for your own website and an intuitive, easy to use front desk system - which together, is everything you need to easily run the daily operations of your property and reach potential guests from across the world.
INFO: info@littlehotelier.com or 020 3151 0101 or www.littlehotelier.com

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more
is
less

We all want more. With Hoist Group as partner you get more. More expertise, wider product range and better service to name a few things. But you also get less. Less stress, fewer contacts and less hassle.

Better still, you get more time to focus on your guests.