

4.2 THE ELECTRIFYING JOB OF THE FRONT OFFICE MANAGER

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The exciting atmosphere of a hotel lobby often intrigues students of hotel management. People from all walks of life and corners of the world cross paths to discuss and share ideas, greet family and friends on special occasions, attend conferences to debate issues, or discuss business deals. Questions concerning arrivals, meeting times, rates, food and beverage services, directions, transportation services, or whereabouts of the management staff and guests create a commotion that seems overwhelming at times. Is someone in charge here? The preprofessional who sets as his or her career objective being the general manager of a hotel and hopes the required tenure as a front office manager (FOM) proceeds with haste will find the role challenging. If you begin your career in hotel management as a front desk clerk, bellperson, or cashier, you have a vast opportunity to explore just who is in charge.

In a 1985 study, Rutherford discussed the important dimensions of the FOM's job, including communications, facilitation, and organizational interface and technical minutia. Selected job functions reported in the research findings included communications with guests and employees; facilitating medical emergencies, selling up, power failure procedures, walking guests due to overbooking, and design of computer systems for the front office; and organizational interface with the director of marketing, controller, food and beverage manager, and catering manager. These job skills and interactions require a person to prioritize and to resolve many issues, to make quick decisions based on sound

corporate management concepts, to empower employees, and to refine exemplary communication techniques.

Bardi (1990, 345–349) stated, “[T]he front office manager must take an active role in gathering information of interest to guests and in developing procedures for the front office to use in disbursing this information.” This information is also needed by various departments to assist in delivering and organizing hospitality. This is a tall order for the FOM to fulfill, especially considering the total realm of potential information guests may require and from what departments. Those hotel departmental areas and their sources of guest information are included below:

Interdepartmental Communication

| Department | Information Needed from Front Office |
|---------------------|--|
| Marketing and Sales | Guest history, reservations, first impressions, relay messages, and guest function information |
| Housekeeping | Room status, potential house count, security concerns, and requests for amenities and supplies |
| Food and Beverage | Relaying messages, accurate voucher information, posting of charges to guest accounts, predicted house counts, and paid-outs |



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|-----------------|---|--|
| Banquet | Information on scheduled events, process of payment of guest charges for scheduled events, preparation of daily function board and marquee, and a public communication post | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communicates information to other departments—housekeeping, marketing and sales, banquets, food and beverage, plant engineering, and security. • Resolves guest billing discrepancies and other complaints. • Prepares budget with general manager and controller. • Prepares forecasting sheet. • Conducts business meetings to promote room sales. • Assists in check-in, check-out, reservation confirmations, updating reservation system. • Interviews potential front office employees. • Communicates with night auditor. • Maintains front office equipment. |
| Controller | Daily summary of financial transactions, financial data for billing, and credit card ledgers | |
| Maintenance | Room status and guest requests for maintenance service | |
| Security | Fire safety, emergency communication information, and investigation of guest security concerns | |
| Human Resources | Initial point of contact and screening for potential employees | |

Thus the FOM must embrace the charge of becoming a proactive communicator and facilitator. This hotel executive must analyze and seek the pieces of information guests will probably need and figure out which departments must interact to fulfill these needs.

Further inquiry into the role of the FOM can be accomplished by reviewing the elements of a job analysis of this position. Bardi (1990, 49–50) presents a job analysis of an FOM's duties on a typical day.

- Reviews night audit report.
- Reviews incoming reservations for the day.
- Communicates information to employees on all shifts concerning reservations, room assignments, and room inventory.

Although this list shows only a few of the many duties performed in any one day in the life of an FOM, it provides the aspiring hospitality professional with an idea of the range of managerial activities. The FOM must stay in control of all activities that affect the delivery of hospitality to the guest—a major function of a hotel's financial success.

If delivering hospitality to the guest is a major responsibility of the FOM, what are the components of this subsystem of the hotel operation? How does the front office and, subsequently, the FOM fit in? An answer to this question can be derived from reviewing the guest service cycle in a hotel (adapted from Albrecht and Zemke, 1985). If the FOM analyzes the various guest-departmental contacts, he or she can move toward understanding how the front office fits into the efficient delivery of the hotel's hospitality services. The potential departmental contacts in the cycle are:



- **Marketing**—Preparing and administering customer surveys with concern for guest satisfaction, advertising methods, and incentive promotions.
- **Reservations**—Developing and monitoring a reservation system with respect to ease of access to toll-free numbers, fax, national reservation system, and telephone manner of personnel handling reservations, cancellations, accommodation availability, complimentary services and products, and general information.
- **Registration**—Developing and monitoring a registration system with respect to concern for managing a guest transportation shuttle system, ensuring a first-contact greeting; providing assistance with luggage; organizing an efficient check-in procedure; maintaining a room status system; processing credit cards; operating a guest information system that centralizes all communication between the guest and the hotel about housekeeping, food and beverage, maintenance, and other hotel departments.
- **Guest stay**—Coordinating guest communications with all departments in the hotel to ensure guest satisfaction in restaurants, lounges, room service, gift shops, housekeeping services, security, wake-up calls, telephone system, and guest folio availability.
- **Check-out**—Developing and providing an efficient check-out system with respect to coordinating flexible check-out times, providing assistance with luggage, maintaining in-room video check-out option, monitoring guest wait-time in line, and providing folio accuracy and printout.

This list of components in a guest service cycle suggests the vast array of duties the FOM

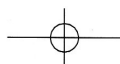
encounters in managing the delivery of hospitality services. However, one piece of “electrifying magic” is still required to make front office hospitality relevant to modern service delivery realities: employee empowerment.

Sternberg (1992) discusses the concept of empowerment as a granting of authority to employees to make everyday decisions within guidelines. For example, many guests of a hotel feel they are in the middle of a bureaucracy when they want to have a charge adjusted on their account folio. “Step aside and I’ll call my supervisor” is too often the response to a guest’s inquiry about a charge adjustment. The cashier is only doing what he or she was trained to do. However, the guest doesn’t care what the training was; he just knows the system isn’t user-friendly. As Sternberg emphasizes, if guidelines are established and communicated, the cashier should know what to do. Here is the manager’s chance to provide that first electrifying jolt of empowerment.

Charges within a specified dollar amount that are debated can be credited or adjusted without the supervisor’s approval. A corresponding control system can be implemented that will reveal the extent of the credit granted per cashier.

Another example of providing empowerment opportunities for front office staff is provided by Allin and Halpine (1988) in describing quality assurance training at the Waldorf-Astoria:

While there can be many reasons to combine the positions of registration clerk and cashier, and many aspects were considered at the Waldorf-Astoria, the decision was driven by a desire to improve guest service where its impact is most obvious—at the front desk. Cross-trained employees speed the check-in and checkout process by performing both functions, as the traffic at the desk dictates. Registration



clerks can cash checks and cashiers can issue duplicate room keys, in many cases eliminating the necessity of having the guest wait in two lines.

Other opportunities to provide employee empowerment can be identified through careful analysis by the FOM of the progress of the guest through the guest service cycle.

The potential opportunities to serve or mis-serve the guest can be appreciated when viewed in the context of guests times service contacts. If 12 million guests pass through a hotel company's entire system in a year and each has an average of 12 contacts with hotel staff—guest service staff, housekeepers, front

office clerks, and others—that's 144 million chances for the chain to give a good or bad impression (Bardi, 1990, 233). As the gatekeeper of many, if not most, of these potential contacts, the FOM is in a unique position to help his or her staff enhance the guest experience. Empowerment is another powerful tool in the FOM's managerial arsenal.

The role of the FOM demands a mastery of communication, operational details, and, increasingly, empowerment. The challenging and attractive nature of this role allows the new hospitality professional to try various ways to apply interpersonal skills that will yield a profit for the hotel. It is a challenge that will last a lifetime.