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The Front Office Manager: Key To Hotel Communications

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The Front Office Manager: Key To Hotel Communications

Abstract

The Front Office Manager: Key to Hotel Communications is a written study by Denney G. Rutherford, Department of Hotel and Restaurant Administration, College of Business and Economics at Washington State University.

In it he initially observes, "Since the front office manager is usually viewed as the key to the efficient and orderly operation of a hotel, the author has researched the job and activities of this individual in an attempt to provide data about an area which he says was "intuitively known" but never "empirically explored."

"Current literature implies that the activities of the front office are so important to the daily operations of the hotel that it occupies a preeminent position among other departments," Rutherford says. He also references, Gray and Liguori, who describe the front office as: "the nerve center of the hote1," echoing an early work by Heldenbrand indicating that it "becomes a sort of listening post for management." The quotes are cited.

The primary stage of the article relies on a seven-page, two-part questionnaire, which was used to collect data regarding the FOM – front office manager - position. Even though the position is considered a crucial one, it seems there is a significant lack of pragmatic data regarding it. Rutherford graphs the studies.

Good communication skills are imperative. "Other recent research has suggested that the skills of effective communication are among the most vital a manager at any level can bring to his/her endeavors in the service industries," Rutherford notes. He provides a detailed – front office communications model – to illustrate the functions.

In, Table 4, for example - Office Manager as Facilitator – Rutherford provides Likert Rating Scale values for a comprehensive list of front office tasks.

Rutherford informs you that the communicative skills of a front office manager flow across the board, encompassing variables from guest relation exchanges to all the disparate components of employee relations.

Not withstanding and compared to technical knowledge, such as computer and fiscal skills, Rutherford suggests: "The most powerful message derived from analysis of the data on the FOM's job is that communication in its various forms is clearly central to the successful mission of the front office."

The Front Office Manager: Key To Hotel Communications

by
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Since the front office manager is usually viewed as the key to the efficient and orderly operation of a hotel, the author has researched the job and activities of this individual in an attempt to provide data about an area which he says is "intuitively known," but never "empirically explored."

Current literature implies that the activities of the front office are so important to the daily operations of the hotel that it occupies a pre-eminent position among other departments. Gray and Liguori call it "the nerve center of the hotel,"[1] echoing an early work by Heldenbrand indicating that it "becomes a sort of listening post for management."[2] Kasavana says that the "front office is responsible for carrying out all the front-of-the-house functions and serves as a liaison between management and guests. Regardless of how the hotel is constructed or organized, the front office is always an essential focal point."[3] Ren- ner notes that the area "is always at the center of the guest-service activities ... [and] from within the hotel, the front office is viewed as a key department that coordinates and sets the pace for most guest services ...."[4]

It is curious, therefore, that there exists no published research on the individual who is given the daily task of directing the activities of the front office — the front office manager (FOM).

In the works quoted above, only Renner and Gray and Liguori give the job of front office manager the merest of notices.[5] Each of the authors treats the operations of the desk in comprehensive fashion, but there exists no systematic discussion of the dimensions of the posi- tion of FOM nor the type of individual who fills it. Kent's article points to this window in the research, but is concerned in the main with provid- ing motivation for the front office staff.[6]

This project was designed to address this lack of research: Who are these folks and what are the important dimensions of their jobs? The FOM position takes a highly-motivated, trained, and competent individual, one who utilizes a special mix of skills, one who can, in the words of one former FOM, handle the "hotel's shortest job descrip- tion: 'Fill the hotel; don't walk any guests!'"[7] Thus the job of the FOM is an important and crucial step in a hotel's organization and, simi- larly, a hotelier's career.

Data Sought Via Questionnaire

A seven-page, two-part questionnaire was used to collect the data. Part I asked FOMs to provide personal information regarding their personal demographic variables (See Table 1) and items relating to career progress and satisfaction (See Table 2). Part II asked managers to provide input on the relative value of 105 "theoretical" knowledge constructs on the operation of the front office.

Table 1
Demographic Variables for the Front Office Manager

Variable	Front Office Managers n = 61
Percentage Male	61.0%
Mean Age	30.4
Percentage Caucasian	80.3%
Percentage Single	58.9%
Percentage College Graduate	55.0%
Percentage HRA Degree	33.0%
Reported Years in Industry	6-10
Reported Years in Present Position	2-3

Table 2
Salaries of the Front Office Managers

Salary Range	Percentage n = 61
$12,000 - 14,999	11.5%
15,000 - 18,999	24.6%
19,000 - 22,999	18.0%
23,000 - 24,999	18.0%
25,000 or over	24.6%
Not reported	3.3%

One survey package was returned due to a bad address. Of the 99 distributed, 61 usable, completed questionnaires were returned for a response rate of 61.6 percent. Responses were coded and analyzed using published statistical routines.[8]

Each of the "theoretical" knowledge constructs derived from the literature was rated by the FOMs on a 1-to-5 Likert-type scale, with 1 being "of no importance" and 5 indicating "vital importance" to the practice of front office management. This list of constructs should not be considered all inclusive, but since the text used is one in common usage in educational institutions and industry training programs, the knowledge range represented by this list of 105 can be considered typical.

39

Mean ratings for each of the constructs were generated and rank-ordered from high to low as seen in Tables 3, 4, and 5. Partitioning the constructs into three groups based on the rank of their Likert Rating Scales (LRS) from high (4.5 and up, n = 23) medium (4.0-4.49) and low (2.483-3.983, n = 37) allows macro-views of the FOM's job from the perspective of the collective opinion of the sample. These macro-views can be characterized by labeling the groups (admittedly arbitrarily) as "Communications" (Table 3), "Facilitation" (Table 4), and "Organizational Interface and Arbiter of Technical Minutia" (Table 5).

Other recent research has suggested that the skills of effective communication are among the most vital a manager at any level can bring to his/her endeavors in the service industries.[10] The service being delivered in many ways has no voice with which to speak for itself, and relies to a great extent upon the manager and employees to assist in the transition of service delivery from the firm to the customer or guest. The process is the product in service industries and the intangible nature of the service process renders communication and interpersonal skills much more important than in a manufacturing setting.

Nyquist, Bitner, and Booms reported research that suggest most communication difficulties in service firms involved a misperception on the part of the customer regarding the firm's ability to deliver the firm's service. With specific reference to hotels, they found that guests making unreasonable demands and/or demands which contravened policy represented the "dominant source of communication difficulties."[11] Assuming a well designed system to deliver the service and technically competent and trained personnel, it would seem the communications abilities of the FOM become central to the traditional managerial tasks of planning, organizing, directing, and controlling.

Communication is Important to Front Office

Front office communications can be considered to occur singly and/or simultaneously within three different contexts illustrated in Figure 1. The first communication context occurs between the front office personnel and the guest or other persons seeking hotel services or information.

Previously published research on front office communications by Farrell suggests that guest satisfaction, good relations with guests, and good relations with peers and colleagues were all closely linked to good communications.[12]

From the FOM's rankings in Table 3, nowhere is this more clearly validated than in the pre-eminent position accorded "Communications with Guests." Indeed, all of the choices under the general rubric "Communications" found their way into the top-rated group. While most managers in modern hotel organizations will probably agree that communication with guests and among personnel is important, what is impressive about the numbers reported here is the surprising amount of agreement on the importance of the various specific communication activities. These 9 specific references account for nearly 40 percent of the top-rated constructs.
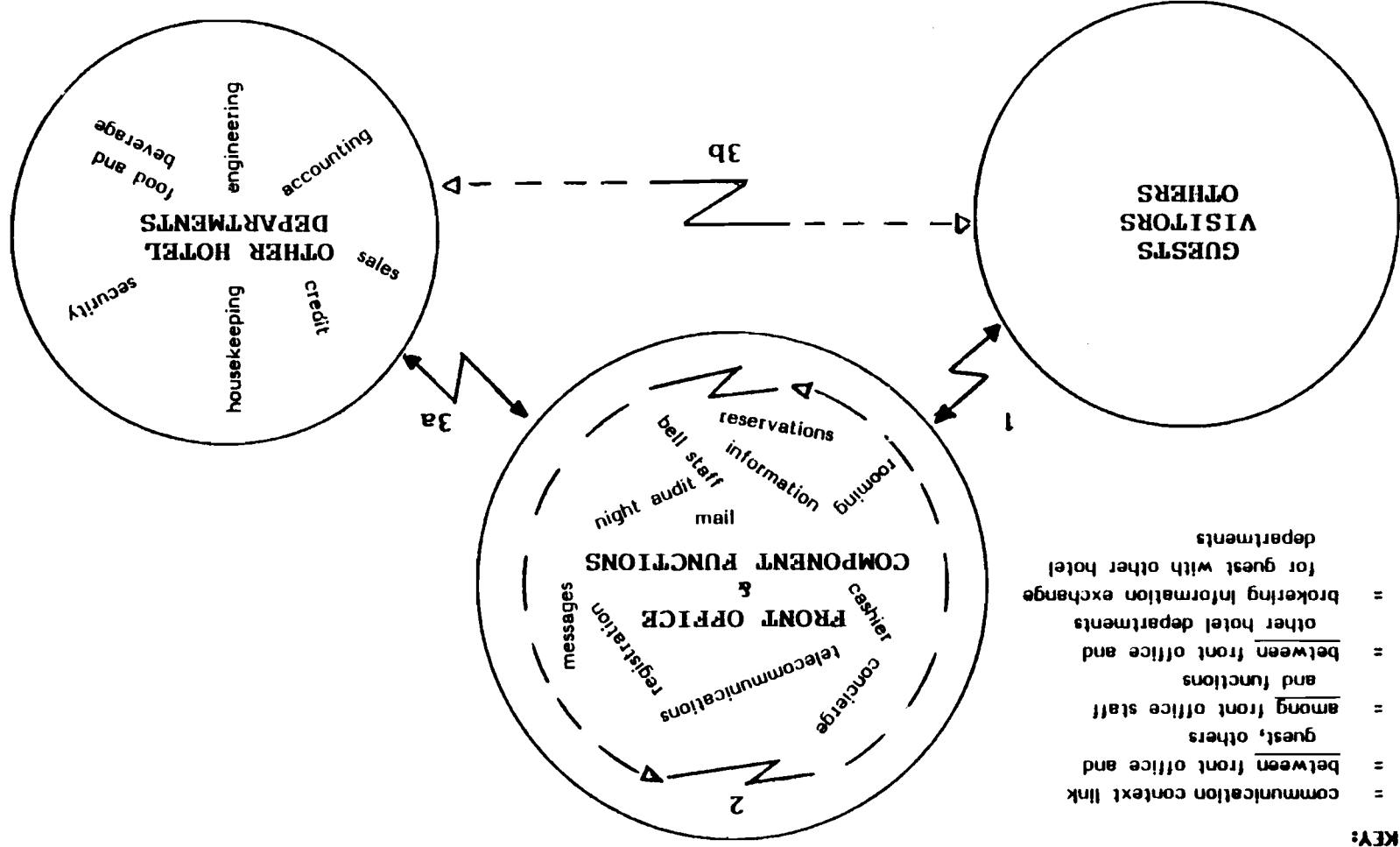
40

Figure 1
Front Office Communications Model

KEY:

~ = communication context link

1 = between front office and guest, others

2 = among front office staff and functions

3a = between front office and other hotel departments

3b = brokering information exchange for guest with other hotel departments

Table 3
Front Office Manager as Communicator
Knowledge Construct

Order Rank	Specific Activity	General Category	LRS 1-5
1	Communications with Guests	communications	4.869
2	Front Office Functions	front office	4.820
3	Greeting the Guest	rooming procedures	4.787
4	Fire in Hotel	emergency procedures	4.787
5	Listening	communications	4.770
6	Handling Complaints	communications	4.754
7	Emergency Communications	communications	4.738
8	Problem Referral	communications	4.721
9	Front Office Manager (Asst. Manager — Rooms Div.)	knowledge of hotel organization	4.712
10	Interdepartmental Cooperation	knowledge of hotel organization	4.712
11	Job of Desk Clerk	front office	4.705
12	Communications with Other Personnel	communications	4.689
13	Registration	rooming procedures	4.689
14	Communications on Telephone	communications	4.672
15	VIPs	rooming procedures	4.656
16	Increasing Professionalism	communications	4.639
17	Full House Management	reservation procedures	4.590
18	Accident Procedures	emergency procedures	4.557
19	Staffing	front office	4.541
20	Room Rates	rooming procedures	4.541
21	Behavior Description for Desk Clerk	communications	4.508
22	Percentage of Occupancy	statistics	4.500
23	Average Room Rate	statistics	4.500

Of the remaining constructs that received high ratings by the FOMs, the elements of the rooming and reservations processes can clearly be considered a form of communication, for it is these activi- ties that are central to the majority of the face-to-face contact between hotel, front office staff, and guests during the service encounter. A case can be made for communications-related activities account- ing for nearly 60 percent of those deemed most important by the FOMs. A quick perusal of the more highly-rated constructs in the second group (Table 4) lends support to this analysis, for the vast majority of those rank ordered 24 through 38 also pertain to rooming and reservations procedures.

The remainder of the constructs highly rated in Table 1 can be related to the broader managerial duties of the FOM. The importance of knowledge of front office functions is highlighted here by a rank- ing of 2 overall, and ranks 9, 10, 11, and 19 suggest other crucial ele- ments of the front office that are important to the job of FOM. Many of these may be considered the "umbrella" constructs under which the facilitation, organizational, and technical constructs reported in Tables 4 and 5 fall.

The fact that emergency procedures (ranks 4 and 18; and Table 4, Nos. 25, 28, 33 and 40) assumed important ranking can be inter- preted as a reference to the FOM's role as communicator, for possibly at no other time than during an emergency is the value of clear, accurate, precise, and effective communication more important. The

42

ability to analyze emergencies and resolve them swiftly rests heavily on managers' abilities to communicate effectively in a fashion that does not exacerbate the situation.

This analysis of Table 3 allows the conclusion that the FOMs clearly consider communication in its various forms central to their daily managerial roles. These roles are also closely linked to the first con- text of the Front Office Communications Model depicting the func- tional aspects of this area as they relate to the guest within the full service encounter. And, while not predominating as it does in the first group, the communications theme carries over in numerous ways in the analysis of Tables 4 and 5 in light of the Front Office Communica- tions Model.

Manager Functions as Facilitator

The second context of the Communications Model (Figure 1) occurs among the people representing the various components of the front office itself (rooming, reservations, mail/messages, cashiering, statis- tics, and the like). These are the daily activities for which the FOMs and their assistants serve as "facilitators" (Table 4). Represented here are the families of procedures and specialized tasks that facilitate the daily duties of the front office personnel, but not necessarily those duties that are always specific to the service encounter. They repre- sent, however, those activities that "oil the wheels" of the encounter or account for many of those "behind the scenes" activities that serve to smooth the delivery of hotel services and provide support for the "encounter activities" of the hotel and the front office. Representa- tive of these are record-keeping in the reservation process, taking and maintaining mail/message files, posting charges and credits to guest accounts, and compiling data and reports from daily routines.

This is not meant to dismiss these activities as a minor portion of the FOM's job. In relative terms, however, the FOMs themselves chose to rank more highly those constructs reported in Table 3. Anal- ysis of the constructs included in Table 4 suggests that those relating to such activities and procedures as accounting, credit, room racks, and equipment might logically be considered to be among those delegated to assistant managers and supervisors for their day-to-day attention.

A curiosity in this context is what initially appears to be the rela- tively low and scattered importance assigned to computer-related topics (ranks 46, 51, 63, and Table 5, No. 97). Particularly with reference to the second context of the model and its associated knowledge con- structs, it would seem the current emphasis on switching fully to auto- mated front office systems would be reflected in higher rankings than the mean rank of 64.25 exhibited by the four constructs offered for ranking in this study. Construct 97 probably does deserve its low rank, however, for it is extremely unlikely the FOMs would be doing their own computer programming.

When the computer constructs are compared with those related to "Constructing the Room Rack" (which can be equated with an

Table 4
Office Manager as Facilitator

Knowledge Construct

Rank Order	Specific Activity	General Category	LRS 1-5
24	Room Assignment	rooming procedures	4.492
25	Medical Emergency	emergency procedures	4.492
26	Selling Up/Selling Sister Properties	rooming procedures	4.483
27	Front Office Accounting Elements	front office accounting	4.467
28	Power Failure Procedures	emergency procedures	4.459
29	Day of Arrival Procedures	reservation procedures	4.410
30	Paid in Advance	rooming procedures	4.410
31	Head Housekeeper (Exec Housekeeper)	knowledge of hotel organization	4.407
32	Accepting/Denying Reservation Requests	reservation procedures	4.393
33	First Aid	emergency procedures	4.393
34	Handling Unwanted Guests	rooming procedures	4.377
35	Cash Register/CRT	front office equipment	4.361
36	Reservation Request	reservation procedures	4.361
37	Overbooking/"Walking"	reservation procedures	4.361
38	Reservations for Group Bookings	reservation procedures	4.361
39	Room Status System	using hotel racks to accommodate	4.361
40	Death in Hotel	emergency procedures	4.328
41	Cash, Charges, & Credit	cash & credit	4.328
42	Handling Credit Cards	cash & credit	4.328
43	Housekeeping Report	using hotel racks to accommodate	4.311
44	Meaning & Use of Statistics	statistics	4.305
45	Reservation Forecasting	reservation procedures	4.295
46	Operation of Front Office Computer System	front office computer systems	4.283
47	Burglary & Theft Procedures	emergency procedures	4.279
48	Handling Checks	cash & credit	4.267
49	Cashier's Report	cash & credit	4.246
50	Floor Plan	constructing the room rack	4.230
51	Management Information from Computer System	front office computer systems	4.217
52	Charting Reservation Data	reservation procedures	4.213
53	Machine Posting of Guest Accounts	front office accounting	4.197
54	Guest Charges	cash & credit	4.167
55	Rate Symbols	constructing the room rack	4.164
56	Unusual Emergencies	emergency procedures	4.158
57	Computerized Room Rack	constructing the room rack	4.148
58	General Manager	knowledge of hotel organization	4.136
59	Problem of No-Shows	reservation procedures	4.115
60	Employee Cash Drop	cash & credit	4.100
61	Registered Guests	city ledger	4.100
62	Sequence of Rooms	constructing the room rack	4.098
63	Design of Computer System for Front Office	front office computer systems	4.083
64	Accountant or Controller	knowledge of hotel organization	4.068
65	Accounting Source Documents	front office accounting	4.033
66	Resident Manager (Exec Ass't or Hotel Manager)	knowledge of hotel organization	4.017
67	Paid-Outs/Cash Advances	cash & credit	4.017
68	Organization of Room	constructing the room rack	4.016

44

information-gathering and reporting system of a nonautomated age and whose mean rank is 72.8), it can be seen as an indication that automated systems are emerging in importance. This may also be heralding the demise of the old, inefficient room rack.

Manager Functions As Information Broker

The third communication context of the model encompasses those regular and typical (or irregular and atypical) sorts of contacts that must occur among and between the front office and other line and staff functions within the hotel organization. These may range from regular daily contacts with housekeeping regarding room status to exchanges of information with sales about reservations horizons and blocking of rooms. Atypical communications in this context may encompass the emergency procedures discussed earlier, special problems dealing with policy or legal questions, or ad hoc requests for front office assistance by other managerial levels.

Knowledge constructs in this communication context relating to hotel organization may be among the most intriguing in this table. While others relating to this category are also spread among the top two groupings of constructs, one-half (n = 6) of those chosen appear in this third list, giving it an overall "flavor" that suggests organizational interdependence. It is in this dimension that the FOM acts as a broker in the exchange of information between other departments of the hotel, the front office, and, in many ways, the guests.

Guests, typically, have only an ill-formed conception of the complex systems that comprise the delivery of services in a hotel. On a regular basis the FOM finds that his/her duties must include a number of information exchanges that help the guests better understand their relationships to such hotel departments as security, credit/accounting, and engineering.

High order guest demands regarding room comfort, spending limits, and understandable concerns about security represent obvious attention-getters in this context. The high visibility of the front office as a representative of top management to the guest makes the FOM and/or designees focal points for these sorts of guest interactions. The success the FOM has in brokering these exchanges — when required — will have a significant impact on the smooth delivery of the hotel's services. Similarly, the concerns raised by Nyquist, et al, concerning misperceptions on the part of the customer regarding the firm's ability to deliver services may be alleviated in this instance. If the front office, through the efforts and leadership of the FOM, is able to ameliorate unreasonable demands and minimize demands against policy, this major source of hotel-guest communication difficulties, if not eliminated as a roadblock in the service delivery system, can be, at the very least, managed effectively. The key, of course, according to this analysis of the FOM's job, is the vigor with which the FOM pursues his/her role as organizational interface.

The remaining knowledge constructs in Table 5 represent the FOMs' lower rankings of individual items from families of constructs

45

Table 5
Front Office Manager as Organizational Interface and Arbiter of Technical Minutia
Knowledge Construct

Order Rank	Specific Activity	General Category	LRS 1-5
69	Transfers	cash & credit	3.983
70	Advance Deposits	city ledger	3.917
71	Organization Chart	knowledge of hotel organization	3.883
72	Travel Agencies	city ledger	3.883
73	Other Symbols	constructing the room rack	3.850
74	Symbols for Beds	constructing the room rack	3.886
75	Locating Problems	night audit	3.833
76	Structure of City Ledger	city ledger	3.833
77	Director of Marketing	knowledge of hotel organization	3.814
78	Uniform System of Accounts for Hotels	statistics	3.780
79	Mail & Key Racks	using hotel racks to accommodate	3.754
80	Posting Room Charges	night audit	3.667
81	Room Rack Slip	using hotel racks to accommodate	3.623
82	Information Racks	using hotel racks to accommodate	3.623
83	Trial Balance of Receivables	night audit	3.617
84	Physical Ledger	city ledger	3.617
85	Categories of City Ledger	city ledger	3.617
86	Proving Charges	night audit	3.600
87	Non-Registered Guests	city ledger	3.576
88	PBX	front office equipment	3.574
89	Manual Room Rack	constructing the room rack	3.541
90	Audit Procedure-Credits	night audit	3.508
91	Folio Trays	front office equipment	3.467
92	Distributing Charges	night audit	3.450
93	Manual Posting of Guest Accounts	front office accounting	3.393
94	Engineer	knowledge of hotel organization	3.390
95	Symbols for Baths	constructing the room rack	3.377
96	Due Bills	city ledger	3.350
97	Programming Front Office Computer	front office computer systems	3.300
98	Food & Beverage Manager	knowledge of hotel organization	3.271
99	Switchboard	front office equipment	3.267
100	Safe Deposit Boxes	front office equipment	3.246
101	Work of the Auditor	night audit	3.217
102	Catering Manager	knowledge of hotel organization	3.153
103	Teletype	front office equipment	2.933
104	Executive Chef	knowledge of hotel organization	2.932
105	Stock Cards	constructing the room rack	2.483

accorded higher rankings in the other tables. This is not to suggest that individually or in combination any of these constructs are useless or inconsequential. In any given hotel these may be appropriate and important to a variety of specific front office tasks. The data do suggest,

46

however, that such formerly technical dimensions of traditional front office systems as symbols (ranks 73, 74, and 95), the various other rack-related items (ranks 78, 82, 89, and 105), and recently-outmoded telecommunications equipment (ranks 88, 89, and 103) are less central to the FOM's job than in the past.

These families of front office knowledge constructs have mean ranks, respectively, of 80.7, 88.8, and 93.3. When compared to the mean rank of computer-related constructs (64.25) reported above, it may be at least speculated that automation has diminished the importance of these latter constructs or pushed them into the background of the FOMs' analysis of operations. More research is needed on this subject.

Communication Emerges As Central Issue

The most powerful message derived from analysis of the data on the FOM's job is that communication in its various forms is clearly central to the successful mission of the front office. Conventional wisdom that accepts the implications of the opening quotes is in many ways validated by the data analyzed here. It is in making the leap from validated implications to operational reality that the importance of these data may be most usefully implemented by hotel managers.

In order to avoid or minimize the service delivery problems documented earlier and to ease the other tasks of the front office, the major conclusion of this study is that hotel firms should consider communications skills to be an important criterion in considering candidates for the position of Front Office Manager.

Successful FOM candidates will ideally possess demonstrated competencies in both oral and written communication to competently deal with the complexities that exist among and between three contexts of the Front Office Communications Model. Furthermore, since the mission of the front office involves delegation and training by the man-ager across numerous (and often simultaneous) service-related activities, it is also very important that the FOM exhibits a predilection to help others among the staff learn these skills and appreciate their importance. In short, the FOM must be a communicator in yet another way: as teacher and trainer.

Front office managers themselves and those who expect to fill that position as a logical career step will also be well-advised to compare their training, skills, and talents to these data. Increased competitive emphasis on quality of service, combined with escalating room rates and more sophisticated travelers, suggests the most successful individuals and firms will be those who minimize the opportunities for miscommunication during all aspects of the service encounter.

The FOMs ranked ''Communications with Guests'' as the most important activity on the list of 105. This analysis also documents a powerful statement supporting the importance of communication in most other contexts of the FOM's job. Hotel firms wishing to implement specific activities to make the leap from conventional wisdom to operational reality will design those activities around the communications expertise of the FOM and, by extension, of the front office staff.

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48