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Technology In Hospitality - Clash and Collaboration

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Technologists and Hoteliers have very different personalities, yet both are critical to successful hotel technology decisions. This article explores the nature of that sometimes difficult collaboration, and offers some advice for a smooth process.

Members of any IT department, from programmers to engineers, tend to be significantly different from the rest of their organization. Their strong technical skills, focus on logic, reason and order, as well as their discomfort with social interactions, places them at odds with the business world. Yet the general business world, where the approach is more fluid and subjective, is not as adept at solving complex technical problems. Nowhere are these differences more apparent than the in hospitality industry, where virtually all of the employees are “people people”. People who excel in hospitality possess very strong social skills and a perspective that perception is reality, “satisfaction” is subject to various opinions, and they don’t necessarily follow an orderly set of rules. Bridging this gap is often left to one of two groups: those who provide IT products and services to hospitality organizations, and more technically adept staff who are often “on the fringes” of guest relationships, such as those in finance and engineering. As the importance of technology increases, an inevitable conflict arises between hospitality organizations and the people responsible for technology. This has consequences that range from more costly, less optimal solutions - to true disasters with large financial ramifications. There are techniques of increasing the success of this team effort, beyond simply recognizing the two very different worlds in which each “side” lives. The answers lie not in increasing the separation between these two groups, but by bringing them together in greater collaboration and by having each contribute their own expertise and knowledge. In particular, each work effort must be looked at closely, step by step, to determine which steps are “business related” and which are “technology related”. For this article, I will use “businesspeople” to refer to those managers and staff members who provide hospitality related services to the operation and “technologists” to refer to those who provide technology services. One mistake to be avoided at all costs is excluding technologists from the early part of a project/effort with a significant technology component, on the belief that the technology component does not play a key role until the solution phase. Technologists must be included in the problem identification or strategic planning phase. The following is a breakdown of the steps in most projects or improvement efforts which include significant technology components. The beginning of any project or improvement effort is planning. This includes deciding broadly what is to be done, establishing measurements and goals, and budgeting time and money. Businesspeople are the main contributors to this phase, with technologists perhaps weighing in on potential costs and their own involvement. As noted above however, it is critical that technologists be involved at this phase, so they have a complete understanding of the problem from the

start and understand what is expected in terms of resources and outcomes. The next step is selecting a potential set of solutions. This may require more detailed analysis and information gathering around the problem, or it may simply need a detailed description of the problem, goals and measurements and a list of those who have solutions readily available. This step is likely to be split between businesspeople and technologists. Businesspeople will contribute much of the problem detail and desired solution, as well as their knowledge of those who may have the answers. Technologists will contribute information about technologies or solution providers who may be helpful, but from a broader and "new technology" point of view. At this point a "tried and true" solution may be most effective or a "new way of doing things" may be best, it's impossible to tell and all potential answers should be explored in the next phase. The third step is gathering detailed information about the potential solutions and their providers. Once again, this is a joint effort, with a high degree of collaboration between businesspeople and technologists. It involves providing a problem definition (often an RFP) and receiving proposed solutions (often a proposal) along with details about cost, timing and approach. The temptation at this step is to have one group or the other act for both. Problems arise when there is no technologist available to the organization or when the technologist is handed the entire problem by the businesspeople, told what "needs to be done", and left to find the solution. Either is guaranteed to lead to a less-than-perfect outcome and in some cases, a disaster. Technologists making business decisions with little input from those using the technology can lead to solutions which are great from a "latest and greatest" perspective, but are impractical or less than ideal solutions to the true business problems. Conversely, in a situation where the only technology expertise is provided by the product seller or another customer, there is a high risk of getting incomplete, or even misleading, information. The fourth step is analyzing the proposed solutions, asking for refinements, more detailed proposals where required, and selecting the solution provider. In addition, all the terms and conditions, additional costs and guarantees and commitments should be spelled out by each potential supplier. Once again, a joint effort, with each group providing an analysis of the solution's desirability from their areas of expertise is ideal. As in the prior step, the temptation here can be to say "Mary can do this by herself now", with an equally high chance of a disappointing outcome. Once a solution is selected and contracted for, the final step is implementation of the project or product. And once again, there is a temptation to draw lines between technology and business and assign each step in the implementation to one group or the other. Big mistake. This does not mean that businesspeople need to know how to configure a server for the new application, but that the businesspeople must play a key role in defining the security on that server and have a basic understanding of what it does. This is particularly key if the technologist is not on staff full-time, because bringing that person back in for each problem or question may not be possible, let alone cost effective. Similarly, delegating technical decisions and actions to businesspeople and the seller can result in decisions that are not in the buyer's best interests. As a group of business-minded technologists, we are surprised by how often businesspeople in a hospitality organization are called upon to single-handedly solve problems that require technological expertise and perspective. Statements like "The GM has been working with that PMS software for 10 years, she really knows her way around it" or "Our controller is a whiz at computer backups" only serve to highlight the shaky technology foundation on which so many operations are built. And just as you didn't ask the GM to ensure that the structural foundation was properly cured and the roof shingles affixed to withstand a strong wind, don't ask him to ensure that your guest data is being adequately managed without some assistance. Even if he is a whiz at computers.