



**Trevor Ward**  
MD: W Hospitality Group

# An Eye on West Africa

**D**o you really want a robot to deliver your room service order?

There have been a couple of reports recently about hotels in Asia and their experiences with robot staff, both positive and negative.

I am not a technophobe by any means, but when it comes to the hospitality industry, I do like to have human beings around.

I'm all for automation where it helps – the hotel industry has been automating for decades, especially back of house. Peeling potatoes is a chore, and using a machine to do the job is very sensible. We have automatic ovens and fryers, but there's still a chef looking after them, and it's still the chef who puts the food on the plate and wipes away the errant spot of sauce on the rim. Manual accounting's a chore, too, prone to errors and 'leakage'; we computerised ages ago, so that the front desk staff can put the ledgers away and look after the guest instead.

And that's the point. Automation should free up human hands to spend more time being hospitable to the guests, not replace staff, certainly not in full-service hotels. Hospitality is all about being hospitable. Hotels in themselves are not hospitable, it is the staff that deliver hospitality, and I am fond of saying that, after the initial impact of the beautiful design, or the 'wow' range of facilities, these become common place, and it is the staff and the food that leave lasting memories.

There's a firm of architects, Gensler, which does a lot of hotel design, and which recently published its 'Hospitality Experience Index' which asked the question: "What makes a hotel experience great?" There's an inevitable and perfectly acceptable focus by them and their work on the built space in hotels, but their research found that "the fundamentals, most of which are straightforward: cleanliness, safety, quality/value, and warm and welcoming staff, are key statistical drivers of a good hotel experience".

If you know your Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, you'll recognise cleanliness and safety as basic needs, whilst warm and welcoming staff meets a higher, psychological need, to do with belonging and esteem.

There are so many hotel brands these days, and it seems that more are released onto the market every week. We are told that each one is unique. But in what way? It is a sea of sameness.

It's the staff that are the main differentiators. Each member of staff is unique. They will have been trained to follow the same processes and deliver the same service level, but each one will do that slightly differently, and guests will connect to the staff of a hotel much more than they connect to the amazing shower head.

The same Gensler study says that "whether with technology, staff, or other visitors/users, the social

and interactive experiences of a place are core to the overall experience... Of the survey respondents, 75% believed the hotel they visited recently had the 'latest technology', and these hotels were significantly higher rated on experience than those without."

The study doesn't state what 'latest technology' means, but my guess would be faster-than-light wi-fi, Netflix on the interactive TV, and possibly Alexa or Siri in the rooms.

What it definitely didn't include was a hotel staffed entirely or majorly by robots.

There are two such hotels that I know of that make use of hospitality robots: the Henn-na ("Strange") Hotel in Sasebo, Japan, which opened in 2015, and the Flyzoo Hotel in Hangzhou, China, which opened this year.

The Henn-na Hotel was billed by its owner as "a serious effort to use technology and achieve efficiency", and not a gimmick. Four years later, the owner has apparently "laid off" more than half of the 240-odd robots. They didn't work, they got in each other's way, they woke up (snoring) guests, and became an irritant to guests. The remaining robots are now, apparently, more decorative than anything else.

Robots are not hospitable, and they do not encourage connection and empathy, they cannot satisfy our psychological needs.

It's certainly not for me, nor do I see a 'robo-hotel' becoming the ubiquitous hotel of the future.

Is there a place for greater automation in hotels, along these lines? Yes, and it's been done, for the last 30 years, by F1 (previously Formule 1), Accor's economy brand. Check in on an ATM-like screen, the front door opens automatically, buy a towel from a vending machine, the bathroom cleans itself once you exit, no staff visible.

What do you want staff for? All you want is a place to sleep. The 'robots' are static vending machines, but I wouldn't object, if say I wanted an extra towel in my room, to having it delivered by a little robot.

Automation and technology do have a place in hotels, and they are much the better for what they provide their guests. West Africa is no exception to that, and we're seeing new hotels incorporate check-in/out screens for those who want them, the ability to open your bedroom door with your mobile phone, internet-only TVs, and those voice-controlled gizmos in the rooms.

But robots serving drinks and food, answering my questions at the concierge desk, or from reception? As a gimmick maybe, but only with a staff member overseeing the little robot, and hoping that I will have "a really nice (human) day". ■

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