Future Hoteliers Embrace Computer-Based Training

Computer-based training (CBT) could soon become prevalent in the hotel industry write the SHTM's Dr Eric Chan and a co-author in a recently published research paper. Drawing on the results of an undergraduate survey conducted in Hong Kong, the researchers show that hospitality and tourism students – the potential hoteliers of tomorrow – perceive CBT not only as an effective method but also one that is compatible with the training needs of hotel employees. Most of the students they surveyed regarded CBT as user-friendly, and noted that they would be confident in being subjected to it. They also indicated their intention to use it in the future. This, argue the researchers, indicates the viability of the method as an industry-wide practice that could be used in conjunction with traditional face-to-face training methods.

Innovative Training Techniques

The maintenance of top-level performance across an industry is no easy task. The researchers note that "high-quality human resource management practices" are necessary and that employee training is a "priority concern" for the industry. Training is now more prevalent than it was in the past, and many hotels recognise the need to invest in specific training programmes. Yet traditional methods such as classroom and on-the-job training, which are still in fairly common use, may be less effective than the innovative training techniques available today.

The researchers write that CBT involves the use of computers to provide employees with "the skills or knowledge they need to perform their jobs". Like all methods, it has both advantages and disadvantages. For instance, CBT allows employees to "access learning at any time and in any place" and avoids the need for large groups of employees to be involved in training simultaneously. It certainly avoids the "time-consuming and expensive nature" of classroom-based learning, but the content can become outdated quickly. The cost of investment in terms of both time and money thus has the potential to outweigh any savings.

To guarantee CBT's success, hoteliers need to ensure that users accept and are willing to use it. In short, then need to understand users' perceptions of and opinions about the method. The researchers thus decided to investigate how undergraduate students studying hospitality and tourism management perceived the "application of CBT in Hong Kong hotels" because the attitudes of such students "directly reflect those of tomorrow's hospitality employees".

Undergraduate Student Perceptions

In their survey, the researchers targeted the undergraduate students enrolled in a Bachelor degree programme in Hong Kong. Most of the respondents were female and close to three-quarters were studying hotel management. The remainder were studying tourism management. A large majority of the students were in their second and third years of studies, so they were not unfamiliar with the possibilities that CBT could offer.

The students were asked about their perceptions of and intention to use and recommend CBT as a training method in hotels. For instance, they replied to questions about whether it would be easy to use, whether it would be easy to implement in Hong Kong hotels, and crucially, whether it "would enhance training performance". Their responses to these and other questions fell into three broad categories: those reflecting the "perceived compatibility" of CBT with hotel training, the "perceived efficacy", or effectiveness, of CBT, and students' "perceived self-efficacy", or confidence, in using CBT. The researchers could then determine the students' intention to use CBT and to recommend and support its implementation in Hong Kong hotels.

Compatibility with Hotel Training

Most of the students thought that CBT would be compatible with existing hotel training systems. This is particularly important because those who perceived the compatibility of CBT were also likely to recommend its use and support its implementation. Indeed, the researchers point out that this perceived compatibility had the strongest influence on the students' perceptions of CBT's suitability as a training method in hotels.

Yet they warn that "although CBT can be a cost-effective training alternative, a hotel cannot blindly follow this trend without considering the compatibility or actual fit of CBT with its existing training programs". Care should also be taken to ensure that the training methods chosen "fit the needs of individual hotels, while the training processes and contents should be consistent with and responsive to local culture".

This, the researchers explain, could be achieved by introducing a trial period to obtain feedback from users before the full implementation of CBT. A "realistic assessment" of the costs and benefits should consider the "time and financial costs", "training needs" and "standards to be achieved". Ultimately, the successful use of CBT in the wider hotel training framework will depend on management acknowledging "the characteristics of the group at which it is aimed to ensure that employees are made to feel comfortable and in control of their learning experience".

Perceived Effectiveness

The students' second most agreed upon belief was that CBT could be effectively deployed in hotels. In particular, they agreed that it "would enhance training performance and job effectiveness" and "enable the efficient completion of training tasks". Those who perceived CBT as a highly effective method also had the highest intentions of using it and of recommending it to others.

As people are often resistant to change, the researchers suggest that it is important for employees to see the use of CBT as beneficial to them. Hotels could "focus on making the benefits of CBT explicit" to ensure that "employees are more receptive to such training". They also recommend that hotels consider using CBT for delivering training in areas such as "hotel product knowledge, reservation sales, yield management, front desk check-in and out, and complaint handling", as these are most likely to improve employee performance.

User-Friendliness

Considering the students' self-efficacy, the researchers found that the "user friendliness of CBT and perceived usability in terms of an individual's learning style were less likely to affect the adoption of CBT". While this could be interpreted as an indication that the students were already familiar with computer-based learning methods, there could be cause for concern. Because hotel employees come

from different cultural and educational backgrounds and have different levels of skills and computer knowledge, they will experience varying levels of difficulties when accessing CBT.

In implementing such training programmes, hotels should consider the level of computer expertise required and "minimise technical requirements as much as possible", according to the researchers. Spending more money on the development of appropriate training programmes and better human-computer interfaces would "ease the use of CBT", and providing support and training would make it easier for employees to "master the system".

A Combined Approach Recommended

The researchers hope that their findings will facilitate the adoption of CBT in hotels and that their recommended strategies "can be used to reduce obstacles to the adoption of such training". Nevertheless, they also advise that CBT should be "seen as a supplement to rather than a replacement for traditional training methods" because the human and physical elements are still important in the hospitality industry. A combination of traditional and technological methods would "improve the overall engagement of trainees" and result in "better retention of the training content".

Points to Note

- CBT is perceived as a compatible and effective method for training hotel employees.

- Many of today's tourism students anticipate using CBT in the future.

- Hotels can adopt various strategies to ease the implementation of CBT.

- A combination of traditional and innovative techniques may be most effective.

Chan, Eric S.W. and Choi, Jennifer. (2012) "Undergraduate Perceptions Toward the Adoption of Computer-Based Training in Hotels". *Journal of Teaching in Travel and Tourism*, Vol. 12, No. 4, pp. 358-376.