

Confusion over Standards Limits EMS Adoption in Small and Medium Hotels

A lack of clear information, guidance and qualified help for the implementation of environmental management systems (EMSs) is limiting their use in Hong Kong's small- and medium-sized hotels. In a recently published research article the SHTM's Eric Chan shows that these hotels generally have a low level of environmental awareness and explains why they have taken limited action to improve their environmental performance. Given the increasing appeal of 'green' hotels and the significance of reducing energy consumption, the study is an important call to action for Hong Kong's locally owned hotels.

Importance and Problems of EMS Adoption

As hotels consume much more energy per occupant than a typical household, they face steep electricity, gas and diesel bills each year. Combined with the expense of water consumption, these costs contribute significantly to operating expenditure. Yet, remarks Dr Chan, few small- and medium-sized hotels (SMHs) have adopted any sort of EMS.

An EMS is a management system that covers the "organisational structure, planning activities, responsibilities, practices, procedures, processes and resources for developing, implementing, achieving, reviewing, and maintaining an environmental policy according to ISO 14001 standards". When a hotel meets those standards it is assured of complying with all relevant environmental legislation, has a effective structure in place to implement environmental programmes, is focused on continuous improvement in environmental performance, ensures that employees are environmentally aware and efficient, and enhances its corporate image.

The extent of commitment needed to achieve these goals could well be daunting for small hotels, which would explain why only four upscale hotels had received ISO 14001 certification in Hong Kong at the time of the study. Dr Chan suggests that smaller hotels generally lack the clearly defined organisational structure needed

to achieve compliance with the standards, and "have a shallow integration of environmental aspects into their core business values". Because production and operational practices can become entrenched in SMHs, "switching to ecologically sound policies can be costly and time consuming".

Hong Kong Hotels Surveyed

To develop a more in-depth understanding of what hinders EMS adoption amongst these hotels, Dr Chan developed and pilot tested a questionnaire comprising 32 statements. The targets were all SMHs with 250 rooms or less in Hong Kong, and replies were received from general managers, chief engineers and environmental system managers. The general level of understanding related to environmental management standards was low, with just over 35% of the respondents indicating that they had a grasp on what was needed to create an EMS. Only six hotels had an EMS in place, and seven intended to gain ISO accreditation.

The respondents indicated that nine broad factors affected their decisions about EMS adoption: a lack of knowledge and skills, conflicting guidance, the lack of a sense of urgency, implementation and maintenance costs, a lack of qualified verifiers/consultants, a lack of motivation and professional advice, outcome uncertainty, inconsistent support, and the ambiguity of EMS standards. Dr Chan notes "a central tendency among SMH hoteliers to agree that implementation and maintenance costs were the major factors hindering EMS implementation". The second most significant factor was a lack of knowledge and skills, related to the fact that understanding, interpreting and applying environmental management standards requires significant technical competence.

Specific Barriers to EMS Implementation

Given his focus on SMHs, Dr Chan narrows the broad factors down into five specific barriers to EMS implementation in such hotels: the lack of a sense of urgency, the ambiguity of EMS standards, a lack of qualified verifiers and consultants, conflicting guidance

and inconsistent support. The SMH managers claimed that the main barrier was the “lack of a central source of information on environmental legislation” coupled with their inability to clearly understanding the legislative framework. This, suggests Dr Chan, makes it easy for SMHs to push aside environmental considerations, especially when the associated legislation is weak. Everyday business concerns tend to be much more pressing.

Compounding this problem is confusion about different EMS standards, with the ISO 14001 standards dominant but not alone in the market. The SMH managers were not sure how the various standards could suit their existing operations, with specific concern about the degree to which EMS implementation might affect the core business of their hotels. EMS standards are general guidelines that apply to a range of different business sectors, and they are often too complex to be easily followed by SMHs.

That complexity could be overcome with sufficient information or good quality guidance, but the managers indicated that assistance in both areas was difficult to come by. They also had difficulty in hiring suitable verifiers and consultants to assist their hotels in implementing and improving EMSs. Dr Chan suggests that the high cost of engaging these professionals, much more easily borne by large hotels, is also likely to be a heavy burden for smaller and mid-sized hotels.

Overcoming the Barriers

An important finding to remember amidst this relatively negative scenario is that some of the hotels either had an EMS in place or were intending to implement one. Dr Chan suggests that SMHs committed to environmental sustainability should consider working with likeminded hotels to exchange “information on and experience in implementing an EMS and also give the opportunity to share resources and costs”, such as those of employing well-qualified consultants or verifiers.

They could also consider forming partnerships with external bodies such as green associations or government departments to further their EMS efforts. Such links, and those between SMHs themselves, would have the added advantage of helping to create a sense of legitimacy when EMSs are finally implemented. Dr Chan notes the increasing strictness of environmental legislation and

the advent of ‘green travellers’ should encourage SMH managers to think in this direction.

On a broader scale, local hotel associations should be more active in encouraging EMS implementation amongst SMHs. They could provide specialist technical support, training courses and the like, and lobby governments to subsidise system accreditation

Towards Implementation Strategies

Despite the lack of EMS adoption in Hong Kong’s smaller and mid-sized locally owned hotels, environmental awareness is becoming more predominant in the hotel industry worldwide. The barriers to adoption in SMHs are formidable, given they arise from daily operating considerations, but they can be overcome. Dr Chan argues that by better understanding the barriers SMH managers will be able to formulate suitable and effective implementation strategies.

Points to Note

- Few SMHs have adopted EMSs.
- SMHs face operational barriers to EMS adoption.
- The most significant barriers are inadequate information, ambiguous standards and lack of qualified help.
- These barriers can be overcome by cooperation with other hotels and external organisations.

Chan, Eric (2011). Implementing environmental management systems in small- and medium-sized hotels: Obstacles. *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Research*, Vol. 35, No. 1, pp. 3-23.