Barriers to Environmental Management in Hotels Identified

SHTM lecturer **Dr Eric Chan** has identified implementation and maintenance costs, a lack of professional advice and a deficit of knowledge and skills as the main barriers to implementing environmental management systems in hotels. In a recently published exploratory study, Dr Chan notes that even though the environmental challenges facing the world are significant, many hotels have still to reduce their impact on the environment through self-regulation.

Environmental Standards and Systems

Pointing to global warming, the over-consumption of non-renewable resources and air pollution around the world, Dr Chan argues that "the moral, ethical, social and political arguments for taking action on environmental issues are becoming more persuasive and more widely accepted". Some hotels, he mentions, have adopted environmental management systems, particularly in line with the ISO 14001 standard, to "develop systematic approach to improve environmental performance".

Yet even though customer pressure, supplier requirements and stakeholder concern about the environment are growing, many hotels have no formal system of environmental management. Such a system, writes Dr Chan, "provides a structure that allows management the ability to better control the company's environmental impact". In the ISO system, this includes "organisational structure, planning activities, responsibilities, practices, procedures, processes and resources for developing, implementing, achieving and reviewing, and maintaining" a organisation's environment policy.

An Important Study

Although previous research has identified effective corporate governance and encouragement from government legislation as the major reasons for hotels adopting environmental management systems, Dr Chan is the first to consider barriers to adoption. He notes that previous research in other areas indicates that external industry barriers such as competitive pressures and capital costs, and internal organisational barriers such as staff attitudes and inadequate leadership, limit the likelihood of establishing such systems.

With this background in mind Dr Chan tested a survey asking about barriers to implementation on 15 hotel industry professionals. After fine-tuning the questions he contacted the general managers, chief engineers and environment system managers of all hotels listed in the Hong Kong Hotels Association directory, receiving 83 responses. Almost three quarters of the respondents worked in locally owned hotels, and a majority had a "reasonable and substantial understanding of the ISO 14001 standard". Yet only 30% of the hotels had an environmental management system in place, with a mere 12% ISO 14001 certified.

An important observation that can be drawn from Dr Chan's results is that 5-star hotels are less likely to be deterred from establishing environmental management systems than their 3- and 4-star counterparts. Not surprisingly, this observation extends to hotels with more than 300 guest rooms and those that are already ISO 14001 certified.

The Main Barriers

What, then, are the most significant barriers to implementation? Implementation and maintenance costs

rate the highest. Dr Chan notes that "money, time, people, as well as other implementation and maintenance costs, need to be allocated and provided on a continual basis to ensure the effectiveness of the system." This can be a problem, "especially when hotel management is uncertain of the actual outcome of the system".

Lack of access to professional advice about environmental management systems rates second highest as a barrier to implementation. This covers difficulty in obtaining authoritative information on environmental legislation and the ISO standards, and the dearth of knowledgeable consultants to advise on how the complex ISO standard guidelines should be understood. "Without professional advice", observes Dr Chan, "a hotel might may not know how to start and implement the system".

A way of overcoming this difficulty, he notes, lies in joining pilot programmes organised by consultancy companies, pointing to the Island Shangri-La's participation in the Asian ISO 14000 Pilot Programme developed by the Hong Kong Productivity Council.

The third major barrier is a lack of pertinent knowledge and skills within hotels themselves. As already suggested, knowledge about and understanding of the ISO 14001 standard is limited. Dr Chan explains this by observing that the traditional focal points of hoteliers are service quality and profit maximisation, neither of which usually admit consideration of environmental protection.

Lifting the Barriers

Combined, these barriers suggest that resources, whether human or capital, are the key to implementing an environmental management system. "In the hotel industry", remarks Dr Chan "support from the corporate office is essential, as this normally is the centre of power to approve the required budget". Without that support, failure is likely. With it, the barriers are likely to fall.

Dr Chan notes that the most effective way of removing the barriers is likely to be actually implementing an environmental management system, given continual allocation of resources by management and experience of the system benefits. Yet, "understanding the reasons behind this may require more investigation."

Another way that the barriers to implementation can be removed is for certification bodies to compile lists of official verifiers and "clearly communicate the standards to targeted customers" so hotels can choose quality consultants to verify their environmental management systems. Yet even so, smaller hotels and those with 3 or less stars are unlikely to be able to afford implementation by themselves. To remedy this situation, Dr Chan suggests that external stakeholders such governments and hotel associations lend their considerable support.

Although he describes his work as only a "preliminary study", Dr Chan notes his findings can serve as an industry reference, highlighting barriers to implementation so that hotels can formulate effective strategies to overcome them. Governments will also be able to understand better the industry limits in addressing environmental policy. Given the pressing concerns about environmental degradation, these are encouraging first steps towards effective solutions.

Points to Note:

■ Increased concern about the environment is encouraging organisations to implement environmental management systems.

■ Yet hotels have been slow to join the trend.

■ Implementation and maintenance costs, a lack of professional advice and a deficit of knowledge and skills are the most significant deterrents.

■ Now that barriers have been identified, strategies to overcome them can be devised.

Chan, E. W. S. (2008). Barriers to EMS in the Hotel Industry. *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, Vol. 27, No. 2, 187-196.