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Saving the Planet, One Hotel at a Time

Despite the urgent need to reduce global carbon emissions, the hotel industry faces numerous barriers to implementing carbon reduction programmes. Why is it so difficult for hotels to reduce their carbon footprint, and why do so many hotel managers remain bystanders in the fight against global warming? To help answer these questions, Dr Eric Chan of the School of Hotel and Tourism Management (SHTM) at The Hong Kong Polytechnic University conducted in-depth interviews with senior hotel executives in Hong Kong. The findings provide novel insights into barriers to carbon reduction by hotels and – perhaps most importantly – strategies to overcome them.

Every industry worldwide needs to contribute to reducing greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions to build a more sustainable planet. Tourism is responsible for around 8% of global GHG emissions, and hotels play a big part in this problem, notes Dr Chan. Every day, they consume “large amounts of energy, water and non-recyclable products” to provide high-quality services for hotel guests “around the clock”.

There are many types of GHGs, but carbon dioxide emissions are “the main factor leading to global warming”, explains the author. Although hotels are making efforts to reduce their carbon emissions, progress so far has been limited. Most hotels aiming to shrink their carbon footprint focus on reducing the energy consumed by heating, ventilation and air conditioning systems. However, this may not be enough. Dr Chan points out that carbon reduction should also target other hotel services, such as laundry services, production processes and transport, which are rarely considered.

“Not many hotels emphasise comprehensive carbon footprint reduction in their environmental programmes”, adds Dr Chan. Given the sheer variety of hotel services and amenities, assessing carbon emissions in the hotel context can be a lengthy process. Hotel managers may be reluctant to introduce such initiatives because of a lack of environmental knowledge or the need to involve multiple stakeholders. “Anecdotal evidence indicates that hotel managers have begun to discuss their carbon footprint”, says the researcher, “but very few know how to implement a comprehensive programme that optimises reduction”.

Clearly, as Dr Chan notes, “many hotels are still standing at the crossroads” in terms of carbon footprint reduction. Yet few studies have attempted to “investigate what prevents hotels from implementing various carbon footprint reduction programmes”. Without such knowledge, there is little chance of persuading hotels to join other sectors in the fight to reduce carbon emissions.

To help fill this gap in the literature, Dr Chan conducted a qualitative study to find out exactly “what prevents hotel managers from focusing on carbon footprint reduction in the hotel context”. He interviewed 22 hotel managers, executives and other experienced employees who were “highly involved in hotel environmental policy planning and implementation”. The majority of

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the respondents worked in four- or five-star hotels in Hong Kong, ranging from independent hotels to local and international chains.

The interviews were designed to get a better understanding of the hotel managers' personal views and perceptions of the barriers that prevented them from implementing reduction programmes and to identify "possible remedial actions". Drawing on the literature, the researcher rigorously coded and analysed the interview transcripts. He identified seven main barriers – four industry barriers and three organisational barriers – to implementing a comprehensive carbon footprint reduction programme.

The difficulty of measuring a hotel's carbon footprint was mentioned by "almost all" of the informants, reports Dr Chan. This problem is certainly not unique to the hotel industry. Many organisations struggle to reduce emissions due to the "absence of relevant systems and standardised approaches to carbon auditing". However, there are so many items and areas to consider in a hotel's operations that "many hotels do not know how and where to start".

It is clear that a formal method of measuring hotels' carbon footprints needs to be developed to enable hotels to "track the GHG emissions and carbon footprint of different operations and service delivery processes". Dr Chan suggests that industry representatives such as the Hong Kong Hotels Association could help to set up "carbon footprint certificates" and lead the development of methods to "quantify carbon footprint inputs and outputs".

Another important industry barrier was the lack of a strong mediator in the hotel industry to "help drive and promote carbon footprint reduction". This barrier could be reduced by identifying a strong mediator, such as an association of hotel owners, to promote carbon reduction and provide appropriate training.

Changes to hotel amenities and services to reduce carbon emissions may affect guests' hotel experiences. Therefore, balancing the interests of different stakeholders is also important for the successful implementation of a reduction programme. "Hotel managers need to promote the advantages of reducing the carbon footprint to their target stakeholders", says Dr Chan, "perhaps by developing a green hotel marketing programme". It is important to communicate "reliable and user-friendly" information on the benefits of carbon reduction to encourage both internal and external stakeholders to participate in the implementation process.

The hotel managers interviewed generally agreed that a carbon reduction programme represents a risky investment because it is unlikely to lead to cost savings. Hotel managers must consider the return on investment for the business, which can make them reluctant to invest in a programme with no immediate return. Given the costs of retrofitting existing hotels, Dr Chan proposes that more effort should be put into designing "green hotels" with all of the "necessary facilities and technologies" from the outset.

Some informants identified a lack of understanding about carbon emissions and carbon reduction as a significant organisational barrier to implementing reduction programmes. One informant

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noted, “If the concept was simplified and more people learnt about it, I think it would then be widely applied”. According to Dr Chan, more education may be needed to help industry professionals understand the various ways they can reduce their carbon footprint. One informant suggested that international hotel brands could take the lead by developing a “model and carbon footprint manual or audit”. Hotels associations should also be encouraged to “organise more relevant activities” such as workshops and sharing activities.

The lack of initiative from hotel owners due to the extra resources and investment needed to implement a reduction programme represents a further barrier. Although guests might appreciate such a programme, it is unlikely to be their main concern, so investing in new equipment and technology is not seen as a priority. The informants also expressed the view that more government support is needed to help owners implement new initiatives.

The third organisational barrier to be identified through the interviews was the lack of stakeholder coordination and support, which is necessary for the implementation of carbon reduction programmes involving “many different areas, items and delivery processes”. Dr Chan suggests that managers need to consider the characteristics of external stakeholders such as suppliers and hotel guests to develop engagement programmes. They should also consider promoting shared responsibility for carbon reduction among hotel staff. Furthermore, notes Dr Chan, senior executives “could demonstrate their commitment by actively participating in the programme to model the behaviour required and influence their subordinates”.

Reducing the hotel industry’s carbon footprint is no easy task: the issues are complex and numerous barriers need to be overcome. Nevertheless, Dr Chan’s study is an important step towards understanding the specific challenges facing hotels and identifying ways to overcome them. The recommendations of the study will hopefully encourage hotel executives to consider how they can develop and implement more comprehensive carbon footprint reduction programmes by “improving their understanding of the main barriers and possible strategies to reduce them”.

Chan, Eric, S.W. (2021). Why Do Hotels Find Reducing their Carbon Footprint Difficult? *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management*, Vol. 33 No. 5, pp. 1646-1667.

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