

IMPROVING FRONT OFFICE OPERATION IN A HOSTEL IN FINLAND

Case: Hostel X

Abstract

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Title of publication Title Improving Front Office Operation in a hostel in Finland. Case: Hostel X		
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<p>Abstract</p> <p>The tourism sector holds a significant role in the economy of Finland. Travel and tourism sector contributed approximately 9% of total GDP in Finland. To adapt to the tourism boom in recent years, more hotels established as well as new forms of lodging such as Airbnb and Couchsurfing. Regardless of the size, an accommodation property should constantly enhance its service quality so that it can survive in a competitive market.</p> <p>The main aim of this research is to answer the question, how to improve the front office operation in a hostel. This will be a reference material for future hospitality managers who want to build their own business in a small property like a hostel.</p> <p>The primary data collection methods of the thesis collected through observation when the author doing his internship at the hostel X. These are combined with the interviews with the manager and the staff. The secondary sources of data were books, journals, and the internet.</p> <p>Based on the findings, the author suggests a development plan to improve the operation of the front office department in the case company. These include changes in the shift time frame, the audit time, using luggage tag and camera surveillance, as well as supervision and training of the staff.</p>		
Keywords Hospitality industry, hostel, front office		

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1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Research background and objectives

Born in a beautiful city and one of the most popular tourist attractions in Vietnam, the author has a special love for tourism and hospitality in his blood. The present author used to work in a five-star hotel in his hometown for several years and has a great passion for the hospitality service. He dreams that he will own a hotel one day. As a young person and traveling enthusiast, he has been to many places and realizes that instead of choosing a traditional hotel, a hostel is also a great place to stay and connect with people from different places in one.

Realize the development potential of the youth hostel model, the author decided to take his internship period in a hostel in Helsinki, Finland to have an insight view on the operation. Since there are many pieces of research about the business side and the start-up plan has been made previously, he selected to focus on another side of the management and it is also his main concern – improving the front office operation. In brief, this thesis will present the insight operation, management and improvement plan for the front office department in a hostel located in Helsinki, Finland. Get to know about the hostel business model will help the future business who has the intention to invest or own a hostel understand and step into the field with ease.

There are two main aims of this thesis. First, there will be a theoretical part giving knowledge about the front office operation and the components that make up a Quality Service System (QSS), and the reader will have an insight view of the procedures behind the front desk. Moreover, combined with the observation from the working experience at the case company Hostel X with the interviews with the Operation Manager and the staff, the author gives some recommendations to enhance the activity in the front office department.

Secondly, the reader will find information and statistics about the hospitality industry in Finland. The reader will be updated about the current situation of the tourism market in Finland, which will contribute to the enhancement of tourist experience.

1.2 Research questions

The research question is a vital part of the research process, not just only a tool. Developing a clear research question is the key to be a success regardless of an experienced researcher or a skillful student. (The Ohio State University Libraries 2019.)

This research aims to answer the following question:

How to improve the front office operation in a hostel?

To answer the main research question, sub-questions were created to support the main question. They are listed below:

- How is the operated in the front office in a hostel?
- What are the problems with the current procedures?
- What can be done to enhance the service quality in the front office?

1.3 Research methods

There are two different research approaches: induction and deduction. The induction method goes from data collected via observation and then concluded as a theory. On the other hand, the deduction approach in a contrastively way, explains data collected based on theory and concept researched. (Ghauri & Grønhaug 2002, 13-14.)

Figure 1 below desmonstrates the research methodology and data collection the author applied. He decided to approach the deductive method, first research the concept and theory then apply to the empirical research to conclude. The theoretical framework of this thesis has relied on the guest cycle by Kasavana and Brooks and the ingredients in a Quality Service System (QSS) by Hayes and his coworkers.

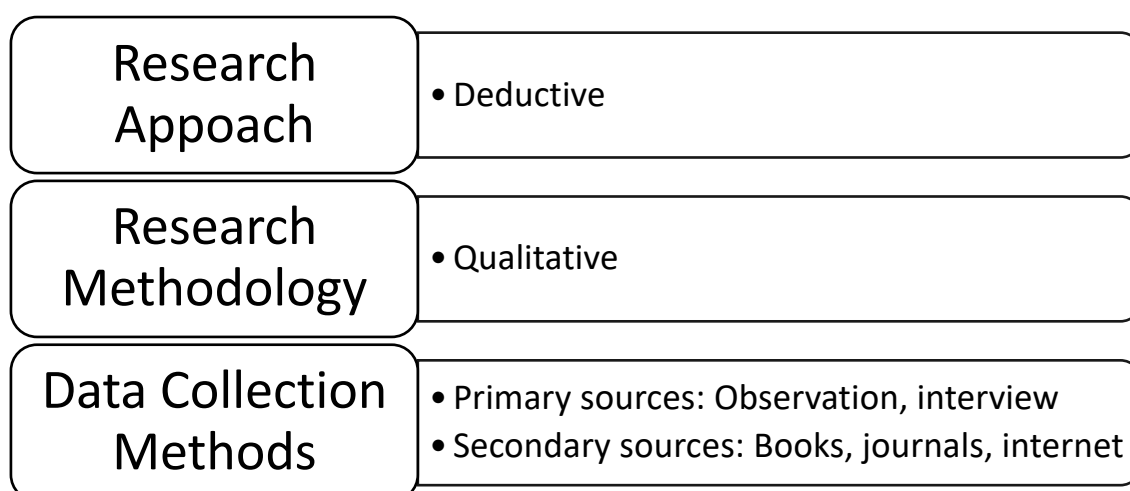


Figure 1 Research methodology

The research methodology is defined as “a specific tool or technique used to identify, select, process, and analyze information about a topic (University of Witwatersrand, 2020). They are classified as quantitative and qualitative. To understand the purposes or social behavior, the researcher uses the qualitative method (Gauri & Grønhaug 2002, 87). On the contrary, the quantitative method focusing on the figures. In this research, the author selected the qualitative method for the research.

There are two data collection methods, from the primary and secondary sources. In this research, the author used observation and interviews as the primary resource. Meanwhile, books, journals and websites are the secondary sources of data.

1.4 Research limitations

In this research, the author focuses mainly on the front office operation of a Helsinki based hostel which is on a smaller scale in comparison to the hotel model. The observations are made in Hostel X but also be applicable to front offices in other hostels as well. Also, the second reason is due to the limited size of the Bachelor's thesis and the volume hospitality management substance. Last but not least, by the time the author doing this research, the pandemic Covid-19 has just begun and its enormous impact to the hospitality industry worldwide is still uncountable.

1.5 Thesis structure

The thesis consists of seven chapters (Figure 2). The first chapter will introduce the topic, the research background, theoretical framework used in the thesis and the research methodology. The second chapter gives information and statistics about the hospitality industry in Finland. After that, the third chapter explains the reader about the front office and the importance of the front office department in lodging. Chapter three also focuses on the theory about the guest cycle and the ingredients in a Quality Service System, which are the cornerstones of the research. Chapter four is about a case company: Hostel X in Helsinki, Finland. In this chapter, the reader will get to know the general information about the Hostel X, organizational structure, role of each staff who keeps the case company runs smoothly. Chapter 5 mentions empirical research, with the data analysis from the observation in the Front Office team and interviews with the General Manager and front office staff. In chapter six and chapter seven, the author gives some development plans for the case company and the conclusion to the research.

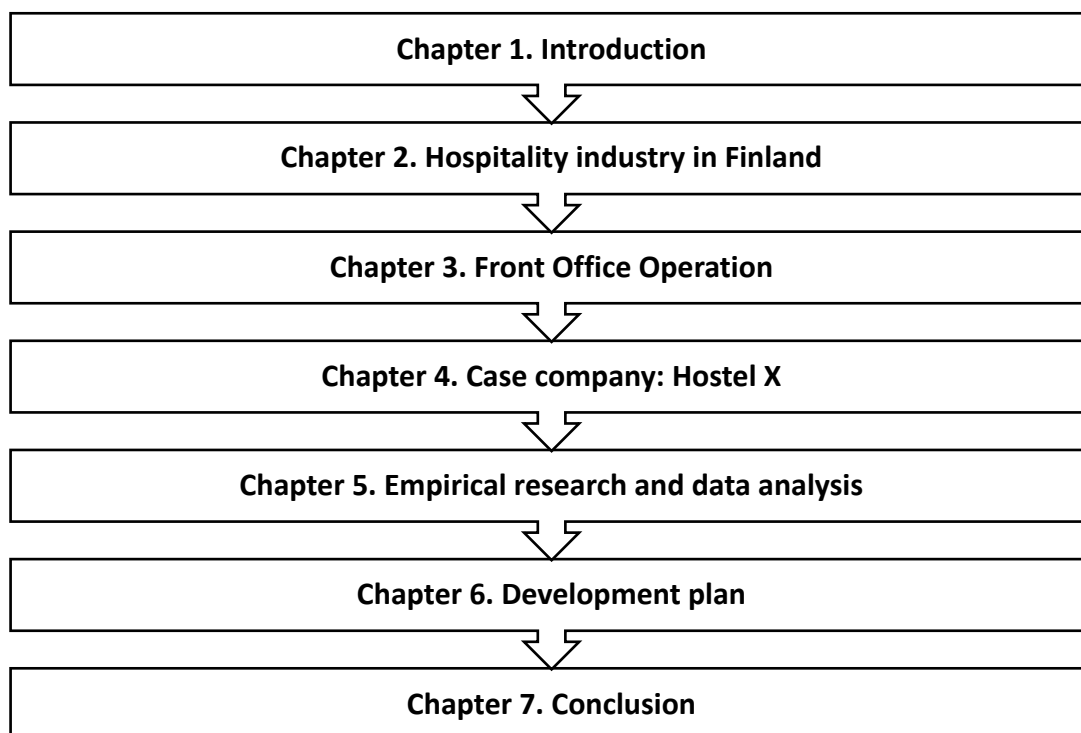


Figure 2 Thesis structure

2 HOSPITALITY INDUSTRY IN FINLAND

2.1 Tourism in Finland

Finland is a Nordic country, it has the border with Russia to the east, Sweden to the west, Norway to the north and Estonia to the south via the Gulf of Finland. The distance between two points from the northmost and the southmost of Finland is 1,157 kilometers. The total population of Finland is 5.5 million. Finland is a bilingual country, with 87.9% of the total population speaking Finnish and 5.2% speaking Swedish, whereas English is widely used in Finland. Finnish official currency is the euro, among the other 18 countries in the Eurozone. (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Finland 2020.)

More than three-quarters of Finland's land area covered by forests. With more than 188,000 lakes, Finland also called with the name "the land of the thousand lakes". Finland is also the home of the sauna, with more than two million saunas national wide. Santa Claus Park in Rovaniemi and the Northern Light in Lapland are the unique points attract visitor from all around the world. (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Finland 2020; thisisFINLAND 2020; VisitFinland 2020.)

In 2018, 1.4 million inhabitants living in the metropolitan area of Helsinki, the capital city located by the Gulf of Finland. Helsinki is a compact city, where most of the tourist attraction places are easy to reach on foot. Public transportation in Helsinki also is voted as one of the best in Europe, as well as high air quality and drinking water. Helsinki is one of the safest cities in Europe. (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Finland 2020.)

A survey in 2018 point out that, there were 8.5 million trips made by international tourists to Finland, with five million of them concentrated in the capital city (Business Finland 2019, 11). According to the statistic from Visitory (2020), as of February 2020, Helsinki has 70 accommodation services, consists of 10,200 rooms or 20,400 beds equivalent. A statistic in 2019, classified four categories of existing capacity of the hotel in the Helsinki region, consist of budget/economy, midscale, upscale and luxury with total 14,821 rooms. Midscale and upscale account for 53% and 28% total number of rooms in Helsinki respectively. Budget/economy room category make up for 11% of the total number, while the highest level of room quality-luxury room account for a minority number of 8%. (Helsinki Business Hub 2020, 38-39.)

2.2 Hospitality industry in Finland: statistics

Table 1 Night spents in all accommodation establishments in Finland 2016 - 2018, by country of origin (Statistics Finland 2019)

Country of origin	2016	Percentage in 2016 (%)	2017	Percentage in 2017 (%)	2018	Percentage in 2018 (%)
Russia	697 596	12.1	821 698	12.2	826 251	12.1
Germany	540 342	9.4	622 991	9.2	628 449	9.2
United Kingdom	500 738	8.7	585 814	8.7	593 034	8.7
Sweden	549 292	9.5	597 339	8.9	560 027	8.2
China	231 573	4.0	313 203	4.6	332 546	4.9
France	249 997	4.3	280 069	4.2	299 432	4.4
United States	231 078	4.0	268 723	4.0	288 827	4.2
Netherlands	174 743	3.0	227 405	3.4	246 460	3.6
Estonia	193 376	3.4	219 504	3.3	222 387	3.3
Japan	214 495	3.7	238 278	3.5	215 746	3.2
Other	2 187 415	37.9	2 567 810	38.1	2 629 430	38.4
Total	5 771 275	100	6 742 834	100	6 842 589	100

Table 1 above demonstrates the annual number of visitor arrivals in Helsinki, Finland from 2016 - 2018, by country of origin. The total number of nights spent from the international tourist visiting Finland consistently increase in the recent years, from 5,771,275 nights in 2016 up to 6,842,589 nights in 2018. Russian visitor remains on top of the overnight stays in Finland constantly in the whole term from 2016 to 2018, more than 820,000 nights which is 12% of the total. Tourists from Germany, the United Kingdom, and Sweden are following closely, about 9.2%, 8.7% and 8.2% respectively. In terms of 2017-2018, Swedish and Japanese number of nights stay in accommodation sites considerably decreased, while the United States and the Netherlands went up drastically.

According to the statistic about the total contribution of travel and tourism to GDP in Finland from 2012 to 2028 by Statista (2019), travel and tourism contribution to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of Finland from 2012 to 2018 slightly fluctuated, around 18-19 billion euros per annum. More specifically, the number went down from 19.8 billion euros to the bottom in 2016 at 18.3 billion euros and recovered to 19.2 billion euros in 2018. In

fact, in 2018, 8.7% of GDP in Finland comes from the travel and tourism field. (KNOEMA 2020).

Another chart by Statista (2019) regarding the total contribution of travel and tourism to employment in Finland in term of 2012-2028, the employment in the hospitality field change slightly. In 2012, the number of people attended in the field was 246,200, reduced gently to 230,500 people in 2018. They expect by 2028 there will be 297,700 people working in the travel and tourism industry.

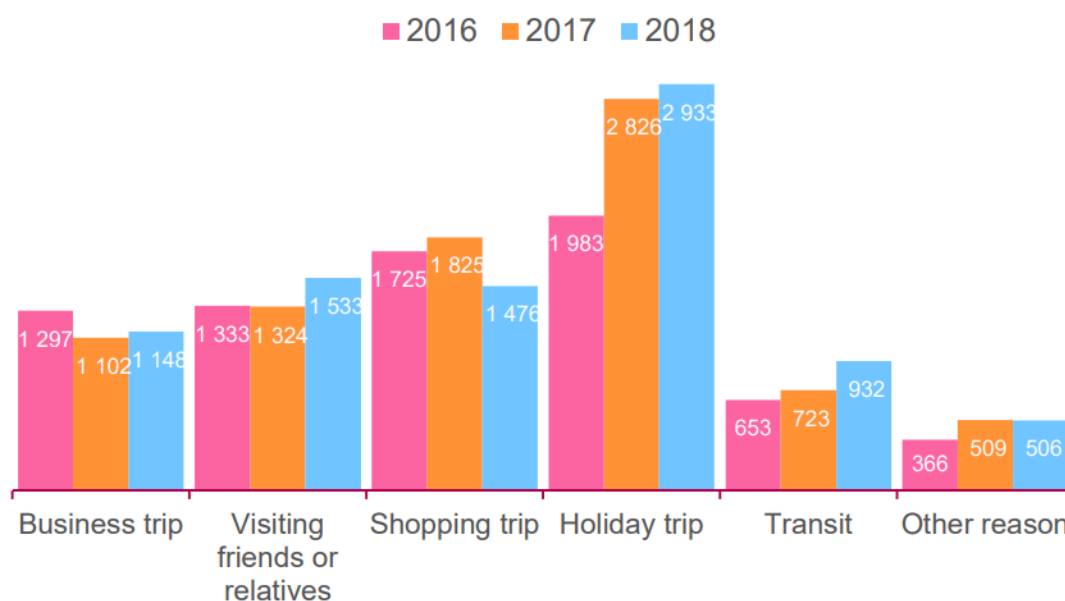


Figure 3 Purpose of the trip (in 1,000 trips) (Visit Finland 2019)

According to a survey made by Business Finland, shown in figure 3, the holiday trip was stand alone as the main purpose to make a trip to Finland, and its number jump up from 2016 to 2017 nearly 50% more, while from 2017 to 2018 the number slightly went up. Other reasons for making a trip to Finland in the same period are shopping, visiting friends or relatives and business. (Visit Finland 2019.)

3 FRONT OFFICE OPERATION

3.1 The front office department and its role

“To many guests, the front office is the hotel. It is the main contact point for nearly every guest service the hotel provides”. (Kavasava & Brooks 2009, 103).

In this chapter, the role, functions and procedure in the front office department are described. Although the word “hotel” is used here, the role of the front office in a hostel is similar.

Back in history, the term *front office* was first used in the United States, but now it is a common word globally. Traditionally, the front office department consists of several teams, such as reception, concierge, switchboard, reservations and guest relations. These elements in the front office department vary depend on the hotel. (Veginis & Wood 2002, 97.)

Veginis and Wood (2002, 97) stated that “the front office department is in many ways the “heart” of the hotel”. The reason is not only from the fact that revenue stream and sales generation are mainly from the front office. Far beyond that, the front office department is the section where guests made the first and perhaps also the last contact with the hotel. As a result, the perception of the guest about the service level of a hotel will mostly be based on the service level at the front desk. It can be concluded hotel manager wants to make the guest’s stay a relaxing, joyful and memorable experience.

3.2 The guest cycle

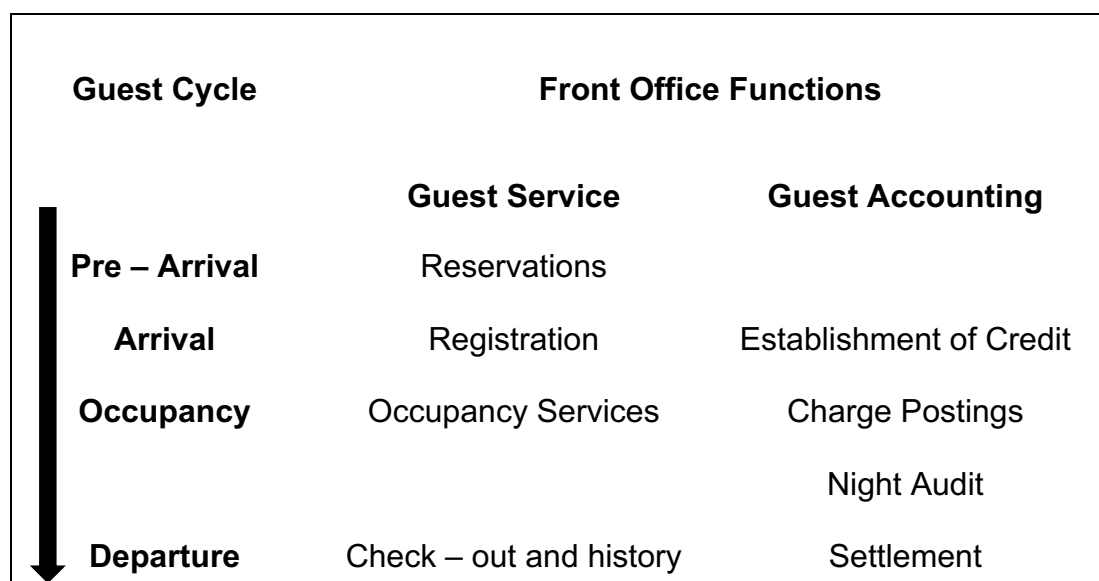


Figure 4 The guest cycle and related front office functions (modified from Kasavana & Brooks 2009, 104)

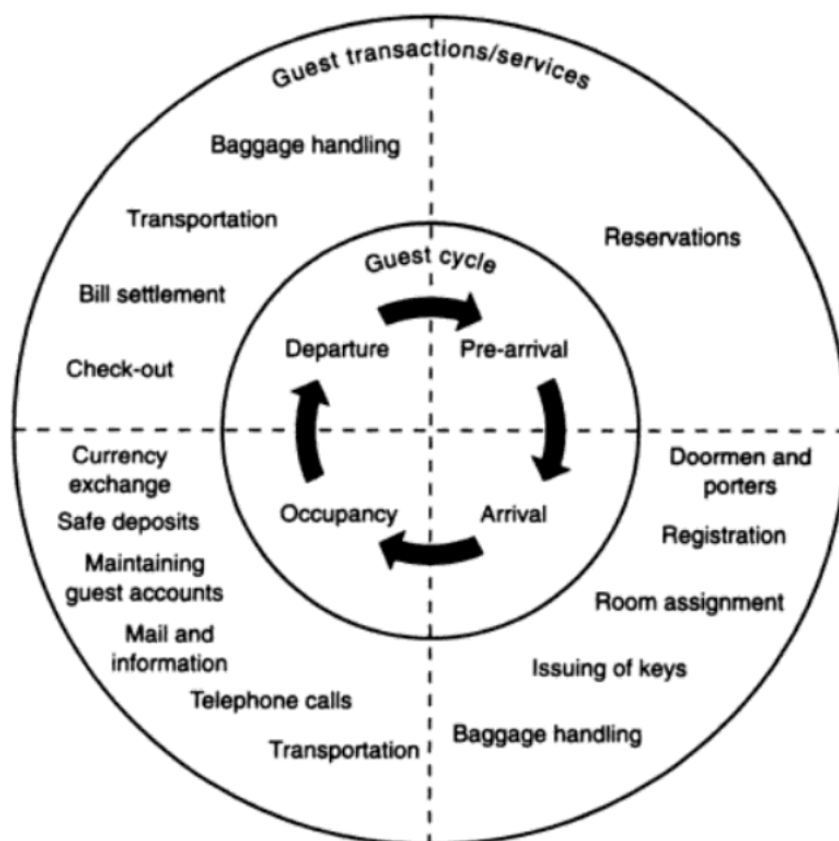


Figure 5 The guest cycle and its transaction & services in the hotel (Baker et al. 2000, 46)

Figure 4 and figure 5 illustrate of the guest cycle and the relevant functions to the front office by Kasavana and Brooks as well as Baker, Bradley and Huyton. Figure 4 emphasized the financial transactions a guest makes while staying at a hotel to determine the flow of business through the property, whereas while figure 5 also focuses on the service throughout the guest cycle. Depend on the size and classification, not all the services mentioned in figure 5 are available in all hotels. In particular, the flow of business traditionally divided into four-stage, which is known as the guest cycle. The dividend into a four-stage guest cycle makes it easier to analyzed and identified the relevant task to guest service and accounting (Kasavana & Brooks 2009, 103). Verginis and Wood also mentioned the main actions in the front office when serving the guest. The front office process is given by them including three main stages: reservation, arrival and registration, check-out. (Verginis & Wood 2002, 99-100.) The guest cycle plays a vital role in the operation of the Front Office Department, including the staff and the manager. A clear understanding of the guest cycle helps the front office attendant serves their customer adequately, meanwhile, it suggests a systematic approach to manage the operation for the manager. (Kasavana & Brooks 2009, 103). In this thesis, the author relied mainly on the model of Kasavana & Brooks as it reflects more complete in detail and covers the general of the guest service process.

3.2.1 Pre-arrival

In the pre-arrival stage, guests select and decide on the accommodation. There are many factors that have an impact on the decision. Usually, the type of travel is the most important factor. It can be a business trip, traveling for a vacation or personal reasons. Besides, other elements also are considered, such as preceding experience, advertisements and promotions, company travel policy, or recommendation from the internet sources or friends and family, etc. In addition, the process of booking and information guests received about the hotel via website or front office staff are crucially significant. A sales – oriented and enthusiastic front office employee can transfer a strong positive image about the hotel to convince the customer to make the booking. (Kasavana & Brooks 2009, 103 – 105.)

After the booking is confirmed, the hotel staff should verify with the customer about the room category, personal information again. This step is very important, it shows the professional of the hotel staff and the guest is expected to stay at the property. Moreover, from double-checking the booking, it reduces the possibility of conveying the wrong information. (Verginis & Wood 2002, 103.) From the reservation process, the information then will be inputted into the Property Management System (or PMS), which is known for the hotel computerized management system. (Kasavana & Brooks 2009, 105.)

3.2.2 Arrival

First guest contact plays a significant role in the service quality. The impression guest receives during the registration stage sets the tone for hospitality and establishing the business relationship between the guest and the hotel. (Bardi 2007, 185.) In this stage, the guest flow is divided into two main steps: registration and rooming functions. After this, the guest and the hotel make up a business and legal relationship through the front office. (Kasavana & Brooks 2009, 105.)

Arrival guests are divided into two categories, guests with reservation and guests without reservation - also called “walk-in”. Guest with the reservation already registered their personal information into the PMS system, under the registration record. This information, for example, include room type, room rate, length of stay, payment method, billing address, email address, phone number and special requirements. On the other hand, a walk-in guest creates a chance for front office staff to sell the room. The staff should know the hotel room very well and spread the attractiveness to the guest to sell the room successfully. The information gathered from the guest registration record brings two benefits. First, the guest specific requirement help employee satisfy their needs, forecast room occupancy

and posting guest transaction properly. Second, this information will be saved in the PMS system as the guest history record, in case the customer may return to stay later as well as analyze these data for potential marketing campaigns. Reservation information and room status may affect the room rate and room assignment. The room status updated from the housekeeping team should be updated immediately to the property management system so that to maximize the room assignment process. (Kasavana & Brooks 2009, 105 – 106.)

The guest room should be assigned in advance to the guest's arrival, which meets the guest's demand. If the guest room offer does not meet the guest's requirements, then the front office staff offer guests different available options that can satisfy the guest. (Bardi, J. A. 2007, 192.) Besides, the front office employee should also bear in mind to check the room status carefully before assigning a room and especially before guest registration. Failed in this step may lead to the situation that the guest sent to an unserved room or even occupied room. (Verginis & Wood 2002, 104.)

Once the guest registration profile is completed, the front office staff will determine the guest's payment method. Depend on the property, several payment methods are accepted. Once the registration is done, payment successfully then the staff issue the room key for the guest, the arrival stage is completed. (Kasavana & Brooks 2009, 108.)

3.2.3 Occupancy

In the occupancy stage, the reception plays a role as a coordinator of guest services. They receive and provide the guest information or request properly and quickly to please the guest as much as possible. In case the hotel receives a guest complaint, the staff should seek for a solution quickly, meaning that he should be a good skill at listening and problem – solving. Moreover, the security of the customer during this stage should also be considered seriously. This is not only applied to guest valuable property but also their information needs to be kept confidential. (Kasavana & Brooks 2009, 109.)

Guests may also use some additional services at the hotel. All of that transaction should be recorded into the guest account. The guest account in the property management system should be periodically checked to make sure they are updated correctly and completely for the system audit. Although the system audit can be performed at any time of the day, traditionally hotel runs system audit at night, since the transaction volumes at the bottom. (Kasavana & Brooks 2009, 109.)

3.2.4 Departure

There are two main points at this stage, the guest service and the guest's accounting. First, the guest service is completed and a guest history profile is created. This is the last contact between the guest and the hotel, so the guest service agent should make this last experience a good and memorable one to the customer (Veginis & Wood 2002, 105). Second, the guest account should be settled, meaning zero balance. (Kasavana & Brooks 2009, 109.)

When the guest checks out, he will receive an account statement record, then he returns the room key and leaves the hotel. During the check out process, the front office staff should show their courtesy to the guest, asking if they satisfied with the stay and suggest the next visit to the property. They can also offer the guest to leave the feedback about the hotel. The aim of gathering guest feedback is to see if the guest stays at the hotel was satisfactory or if there were any guest service issues, the manager may identify (Veginis & Wood 2002, 106). Once guests leaving the front desk, the room status is updated to the PMS system immediately and the account on the system is closed. Now a guest history record is created. Via the information given, the hotel may use it for further marketing and promotion campaigns. Moreover, this information also uses for management purposes, such as operation reports, service issues, and business trends. From these reports, the manager can evaluate the performance and enhance the operation procedures in the front office. (Kasavana & Brooks 2009, 110.)

3.3 Ingredients in a Quality Service System

While staying in a hotel, the guest is not only looking for a bed to sleep but also the service come along with it. Service quality is the core of the hospitality industry. After searching for different models relevant to the service quality, the author found out that Hayes and others (2012, 48-51) proposed a quality guest service system consists of six components in the hospitality industry. These six components that are the key to enhance the quality service system are listed and discussed below in this section:

- Understanding the target customer segment
- Determine what the guests desire
- Develop procedures to deliver what guests want
- Train and empower staff
- Implement revised systems
- Evaluate and modify service delivery systems

Hayes and others (2012, 48) noted that one hotel serves a narrow range of guests, while the other serves a wider range. Understand the customer segment is a must for the manager. The useful tools to collect these data are via marketing tactics and identify the guest's expectation in the service.

To understand the guest's needs or demands, the manager can make a direct question with the guest in the lobby or deliver a comment card to the guest. A guest comment is not only express their feeling but also be precious information evaluate and improve the service. The employee also is an important source, since they are the people who contact guests more than their upper-level manager.

According to Hayes and others (2012, 49-50), there are two ways to improve the guest service procedures, they are the benchmark and utilizes cross-functional teams of employees. Benchmarking is the process to evaluate and determine the performance. Cross-functional teams including staff from different teams in the hotel. They gather and contribute ideas to enhance the procedures in the property. The most advantage of this method is improving interdepartmental problem - solving.

A new employee should be trained adequately. The training progress should be revised regularly. And employees should be always kept up to date with the new working procedures which giving customers a better experience. Empowerment meaning that employee is approved to decide on their own in certain situations, as long as pleased the guest.

To find the best way to improve the quality service, there are many different ideas. Revised system meaning the manager carries out an experimental working method first on a small scale to see the result. If the feedback results positive, the idea then can be implemented widely, with some adjustments if needed.

Guest preference, along with technology and new work methods, is changing time over time. The result is, these factors also impact the guest demand and the service. The manager to evaluate and adjust the current procedures to adapts to the situation.

To serve the guest better, the management board should identify the issue. Traditionally, the guest comment card is used to collect guest feedback. Nowadays, with the development of technology, it is easier for the manager to understand guest experience in the property. Social networks, webpage, email surveys, or online reviews are common ways. These data then analyzed to figure out the issues. Then an action plan should be taken to solve the problem. The final result is to satisfy guest's desires.

4 CASE COMPANY HOSTEL X

4.1 Introduction of Hostel X

Travelling is becoming much easier and easier. It has increased at the young people group rapidly in recent years, stands for more than 23% of the total one billion travelers internationally annually. This trend is a great chance for the locals as it boosts the economic, increment interaction between the young tourist and the native people, and preserve ecological diversity. (WYSETC 2020, 5.) According to a report, the youth hostel segment has seen a growth rate up to 7%-8% for years, with the bed revenue estimated 5.2 billion dollars (Hostelworld Group 2020, 2).

The case company in the thesis called Hostel X opened in May 2012 in Helsinki, Finland. The vision and mission of the company are stated as providing an affordable sleep place but maintain high-quality service and guest satisfaction. The advantage of Hostel X is not only the affordable price but also comes from its location, which is close to the city center. It takes about 15 minutes by bus or tram to the central station or 45 minutes to the Helsinki Vantaa Airport by bus which run 24/7.

The different types of accommodation Hostel X offer aiming to two target customer segments: for budget travelers and the people with higher standards with total capacity up to 276 passengers. For budget travelers, the variety of choices come from different sizes of dormitories as small as 4 beds to 8, 10, 16, 18, 24, and 26 beds which also include three rooms, one for 10 and the other two 18 dorm beds only for female customer. On the other hand, for customers who require a little more privacy, Hostel X also offers different private room types: 4 twins, 13 doubles, 2 triples, 4 family rooms with shared bathrooms and 1 Double Ensuite with bathroom inside. The wide range of choice Hostel X offer helps their guest make a decision match with their demand. Length of stay can vary from one night to one month.

The facilities of the hostel include free Wi-fi, two kitchens with equipped kitchenwares and fridges, free locker to keep the belonging of the guest and luggage room. There also vending machines, coffee machines, gaming machines and a supermarket downstairs. Guests can enjoy a drink inside the building at the bar located on the second floor, open daily from 5 pm till 1 am except Sunday at a reasonable price.

Excluding the Finnish guest group, the other biggest group come to Hostel X are Russian and Asian, and also people from all around the world. The young traveler age between 20 to 30 is the major group stay there. There are people traveling alone, couples, or in a group.

Quite often Hostel X has a big group of people coming to stay, vary from 10 to 30 or even much more. They can be Finnish or from other European countries, which attend to some events or maybe from an educational institution. In 2017, from the statistic, Finland, Russia, Germany, France, U.S.A., Spain, United Kingdom, Japan, China, and Italy are top ten biggest groups of customers at Hostel X respectively. (Hostel X 2018.)

4.2 SWOT analysis

SWOT stands for strength, weakness, opportunity and threat respectively. According to Mitchell Grant (2020), a SWOT analysis scheme shows the abilities of a company in comparison to its rivals on the market. It also a useful tool to form necessary strategic plans. To be clear, the strength and weakness are the internal factors which company can actively improve, while opportunity and threat are the external factors. The table 2 below demonstrates the SWOT analysis of Hostel X in the accommodation market in Finland.

Table 2 Hostel X SWOT analysis

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Affordable price • Variety of room sizes and types • Entertainments inhouse and outside • Added services • Helpful staffs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Location • Cleanliness and maintenance • Service quality
Opportunities	Threats
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tourism boom in Finland • Modernization • Brand image 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Current and future competitors, hotels and hostels in town. • Other forms of accommodation, such as Airbnb, CouchSurfing

4.2.1 Strengths

The strength of Hostel X comes from its price, rooms diversity, services and staff. The price at the hostel range from 18.40 euros for a bunk bed to 81.60 euros for a private room. In comparison, according to the statistic of Statistics Finland (2020), the average price of a hotel room in Helsinki in December 2019 was 120.78 euros per night, much higher than the price offered at Hostel X. The wide range of choice of room sizes and types in both dormitory rooms and private rooms, give the customer easier to choose the room that meets their demand and budget. Although located not too far from the city center, but it offers an affordable price, in comparison to the other rivals in town. There is a

computer with arcade game machines and even a bar available at the hostel, as well as the weekly party to connect in-house guests and discover Helsinki together by night. Moreover, the staffs come from many different countries which can speak many languages are also the advantage points.

4.2.2 Weaknesses

Nevertheless, in the peak season, the frequency of toilet using by the guest is higher so that it leading to the cleanliness issues. Limited human resource and service training in the hostel also affect the consistency of service quality. Moreover, some of the guests commented about the location of the Hostel X, since its location not close to the city center, reflected by the lowest point on Booking.com which will be discussed later in this chapter.

4.2.3 Opportunities

Opened for a long time, cooperate with many online travel agents as well as its owned booking webpage, the average points of reviews on Booking.com is 8.2 give Hostel X a strong brand image to the potential customer. With the combination of brand image and new technology, Hostel X should use it to attract new customers. The Finnish tourism boom in recent years breaks the records is a good signal for the success of the hospitality industry in Finland, bringing more revenues and employment to the Finnish economy (FINNFACTS 2019).

4.2.4 Threats

However, also due to the development of technologies recently, more rivals joining the accommodation supply industry, such as Airbnb, CouchSurfing, or the traditional hotels also be the threat to Hostel X.

4.3 Hostel X reviews

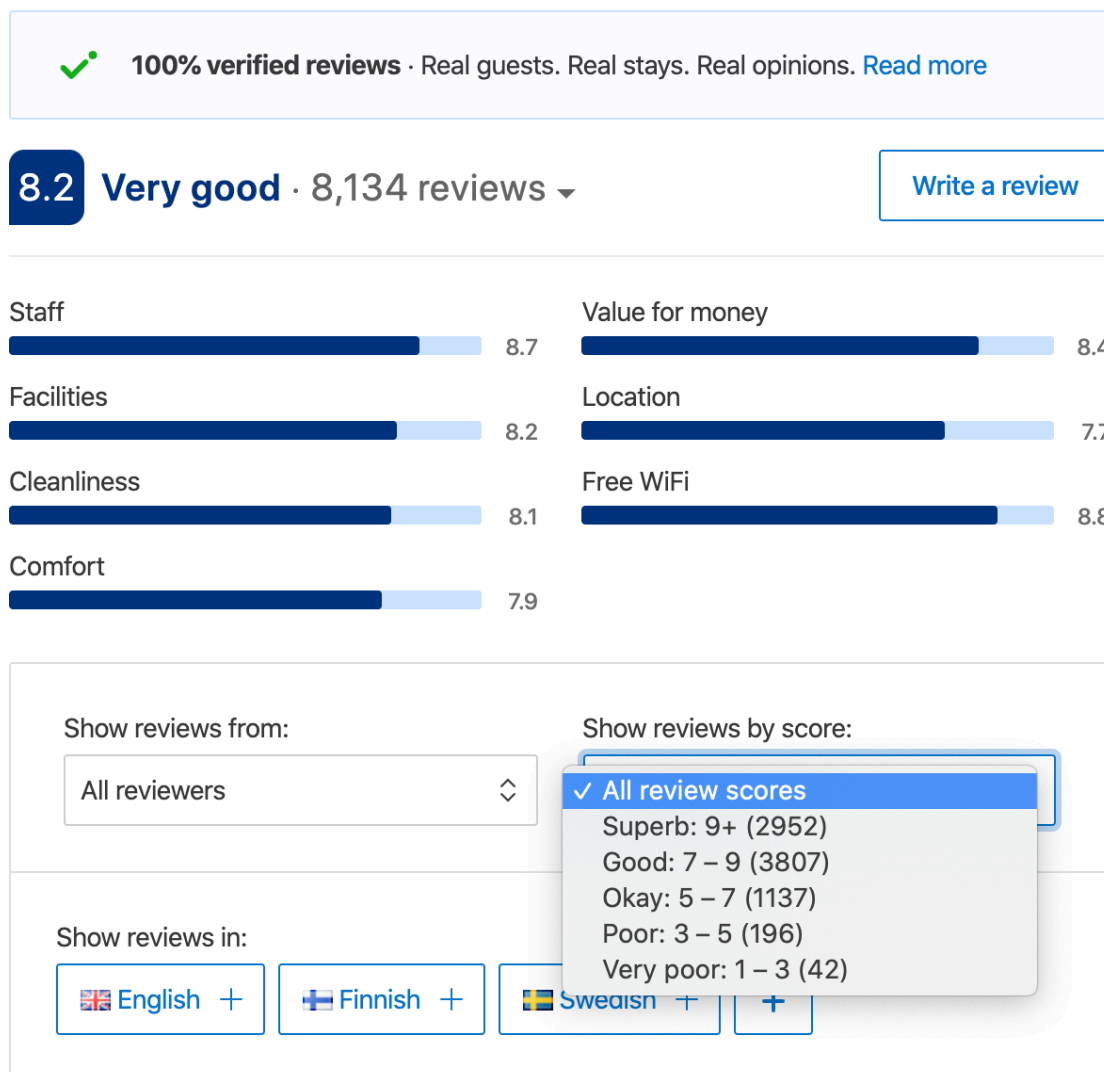


Figure 6 Hostel X reviews on Booking.com

Figure 6 is the screen capture of the Hostel X reviews page on Booking.com. Since most of the guest bookings of Hostel X come from Booking.com, so this is a significant source of evaluation when Hostel X management team needs to check the performance of the hostel. Every day the management team looks at the reviews, and especially in the monthly meeting, the latest reviews are analyzed together with the staff to discuss the solution (Hostel X General Manager 2020). The figure 6 above from Booking.com shown the average point 8.2 – Very Good that Hostel X rated with 8,134 reviews. The review points are based on scale 10, which is classified into 5 categories: superb for above 9, good for 7-9, okay for 5-7, poor for 3-5 and very poor for 1-3. From the total number of 8,134 reviews, there were 46,8% of guest reviews Good, this is also the biggest proportion. The second biggest proportion belong to Superb, with 36.29%. Fewer guests give lower

scores, from Okay to Poor and Very poor, with 13.97%, 2.4% and 0.54% respectively. There are 7 criteria in the reviews, they are staff, facilities, cleanliness, comfort, value for money, location and free WiFi. The two criteria below 8 points are comfort and location. The other criteria are all above 8 points, with the highest point 8.8 belongs to the Free WiFi. In general, this is a very good result of Hostel X from customer feedback.

4.4 Organization structure and hierarchy model

The organizational structure of a hospitality property and staffing depends on many factors: available human resources, regional economic condition, and the organization budget. Each organization chart should be designed based on evaluating the needs of the guest. (Bardi 2007, 45). Other researchers, Verginis and Wood (2002, 99) stated that a larger hotel with plenty of human resources has the advantage to separate and specific job to the front office personal. On the contrary, a smaller hotel with a limited budget may combine the tasks in one position. Different hotels choose different structures fit them best.

The staff of Hostel X is mainly divided into two main categories: management team and four staff teams. The company culture also points that despite different responsibilities, each of them will help each other with their abilities.

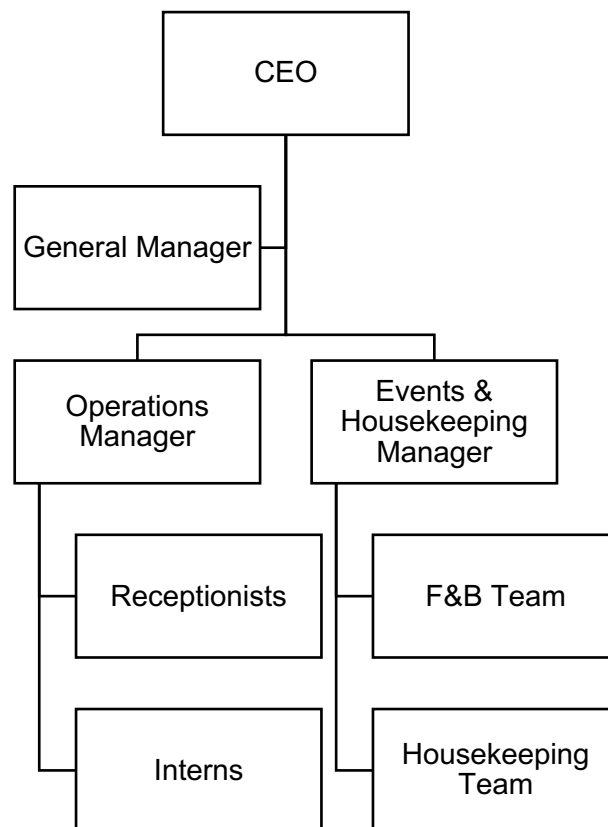


Figure 7 Hostel X organization hierarchy

Figure 7 demonstrates the modified hierarchy model of Hostel X. The management team includes four managers: CEO (Chief Executive Office), General Manager, Operations Manager and Events & Housekeeping Manager. Four staff teams consist of receptionists, interns, F&B (Food and Beverage) team and housekeeping team. The role of each position in the hostel are described in detail below:

- **CEO:** CEO is the highest position in the Hostel X organizational structure. He is the founder and owner of the hostel.
- **General Manager:** general manager supervises the overall operation of the hostel, dealing with business partners and report to the CEO.
- **Operations Manager:** operation manager in charge of the front office, including recruit, training, scheduling and supervise staff in the reception.
- **Events & Housekeeping Manager:** Event and housekeeping manager taking care of the operation of the F&B team and housekeeping team in terms of scheduling shifts and plans, supervise the cleanliness of the hostel and the operation of the bar.
- **Receptionists:** receptionists are the employee working at the front desk. Their main tasks including check-in and check out guests, handling reservation and customer requirements, updating hostel content on the social media channels and support other teams if needed. The receptionist team consists of three full-time employees plus two interns. During peak season, more trainees and casual labor are added to the department to keep the operation running smoothly.
- **Interns:** Interns are employees who work full-time at the hostel during their practical training. At first, they have orientation training in all departments. They are mainly divided into the receptionist team and housekeeping team, but they also in charge of the F&B team. Depend on the occupancy, the number of interns at the hostel varies from three to seven at a time.
- **F&B Team:** F&B meaning Food and Beverage. This team handling the breakfast, parties and the bar. There are four persons on this team. The human resource in the F&B team comes from interns, both in the front office and housekeeping team.
- **Housekeeping Team:** housekeeping team is responsible for the cleanliness of the public areas and the guest rooms. This is the backbone of the hostel. Usually, there are four full-time staff and three interns working in three different shifts to cover most of the day.

5 EMPIRICAL RESEARCH AND DATA ANALYSIS

5.1 Introduction

There are two data collection methods applied to the research. The first method is observation, which the author recorded when he worked as an intern receptionist at Hostel X from the summer 2018 to the end of the year. The second method is the interview, as the author made some interviews with the General Manager and some staff in the Front Office team. The interviews were made in April 2020, and the author choose the the person who already are full-time staff and has been working for the hostel at least one year. The first staff has been working at the hostel for three years, while the second one has been working there for 2 years. The duration of each interview is about 15-20 minutes.

5.2 Observation: the daily operation in Hostel X's Front Office

5.2.1 Things to do in a shift

The front desk at Hostel X opens 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. As a result, there are three different shifts to maintain the operation, the morning shift from 9 am till 5 pm, evening shift from 5 pm till 1 am, and night shift from 1 am till 9 am. A working shift at Hostel X begins with the shift handling with the previous shift worker. They will have a briefing about what needs to be follow up, count the cash float and compare with the number on the report. After that, the employee is ready to log in to his or her account in the Property Management System (PMS) to start his or her shift. The following tasks are similar for all shifts:

- Assign beds for arrival guests.
- Check email for new reservations, update booking and input new booking information into the PMS if needed.
- Charge new bookings and record them on the system.
- Receive phone calls and give support, guidance, or receive booking via telephone.
- Check the guest's account balance on the system.
- Check the guest in.
- Fill maps, amenities, travel guides to the shelves

About 30 minutes before the shift end, the receptionist should finish some documents. He/she should check the Check List again to make sure that all tasks have been done or need to be follow up, then note it down to the next shift. The next step is recorded the money has been charged from the guest account or cash collected to the receptionist

Folder. And lastly, count the cash float and compare it with the number in the Receptionist Folder to see if the transaction recorded correctly.

Among the above task, a receptionist at a hotel needs to handle other tasks as well because the hostel model relies on a lean organization structure. The receptionist needs to check the camera system regularly to remain secure. Checking for guest queries from different booking channels. Doing marketing on social media channels is also important. Figure 8 presents the checklist of the morning shift at Hostel X. They include three columns: time, task, and tick box.

Morning shift 9:00-17:00		
09:00	Count current float:	
All day	Read email and reply	
	a) cancellation/modifications entered, quantity:	
	b) non-interfaced reservation entered manually, quantity:	
	c) NRF booking and late cancellation are charged, quantity:	
All day	Check in:	
	Read all the facebook posts since your last shift and Facebook Page Messages.	
09:00	Roll the day	
	Check out due out guests.	
	Complete all bed-move first (check manual guide for instruction), then print cleaning list. Give cleaner master key for lockers	
	Posted on FB group all the issues occurred during the shift/things to report about	vc
	Walk through the hostel to check maintenance issues and report.	
	Throw expired foods in the fridge and clean kitchens 4th floor (12:30) - 2nd floor 14:00	
	Fill in maps and other material, quantity:	
10:00	Print ferry new schedule and stick under public transportation map	
11:00	Put music on, and keep it on	
	Update "Invalid credit card report" if you have marked any today. Quantity:	
15:00	Update room attendant Status in CMS (CLEAN). Walk through the dorms to update the cleaning status.	
	Get back the master key for locker from cleaner	
	Take the cleaning report from the cleaners.	
15:15	Check "due-out tomorrow" and see if any guests has an outstanding balance. Write all the related folios to box "Undone tasks" for next shift	
	"Invalid card report" If you have marked any today, quantity:	
16.30	Review all check ins you did, see if all have paid, posted and checked in CMS.	
	Balance your account. If unbalanced, fill in unbalance check-list	
	Put extra money in the envelope, if not, why:	
	Fill in the daily balance sheet	
	Check everything guest(s) borrow(s) is returned, quantity:	
	Total number of check ins:	
Departing Staff Sign		
Undone Tasks for next shift:		

Figure 8 Reception Task List (Hostel X 2018)

Besides the similarities task, there are different tasks in each shift. In the morning shift, the receptionist needs to do Night Audit at the beginning of the shift, check out guests and print Due Out List to the Housekeeping team. When the housekeeper gives a list of the vacant clean room, the receptionist needs to update those rooms to the PMS system as soon as possible and correctly. In the night shift, the receptionist has more time to go around and check the status of the hostel. There are several areas need to be checked and clean in the hostel. In the common area, he needs to check there is no one stay there unless they are in-house guests, clean and organize so that it looks nice and tidy. In the kitchen area, he needs to clean the fridge and the stove, organize the kitchenware. He also fills the vending machines and does the audit for the items sold if needed. Toilets are also important places need to check carefully to make sure that they are clean and hygiene. After that, the reception desk also needed to clean up neatly, fill and organize the documents into the folders. Last but not least, the night shift receptionist double-checks the transaction during the day before, check account balance of due out guest for the upcoming day and record the No-Show customer and update them on the PMS, also to the No-Show folder. These tasks should be done around 2 am and 5 am.

5.2.2 The guest cycle at Hostel X

- Pre – Arrival

Nowadays a large number of accommodation bookings made via online booking channels. For example, some of the most popular booking channels are Booking.com, Expedia, Agoda, etc. At Hostel X, most of the bookings also come from booking channels. Depend on the policy vary between them, when received booking the receptionist need to know how to handle them when via notification from the reservation emails and compare to the information updated to the PMS if it is distributed correctly.

On the other hand, guests can also make a reservation via telephone or walk-in. The receptionist needs to check first the room type, the number of passengers, date of arrival, length of stay then check the given information in the PMS to see the availability. After that, the front office attendant informs the guest the room rate. If the guest accepts the room rate, the receptionist creates the booking on the PMS.

In case guest have a special requirement, the receptionist needs to note to the guest folio so that the assigned room meets the demand, for example, a quiet room or lower bed.

- Arrival

On arrival, when the customer comes to the Front Desk, they will be greeted with a smile from the staff. The receptionist will ask for the ID or passport from the guest to check their information from the Arrival List in PMS. In the meantime, the staff will give the Registration Form for the customer to fill in. When found the guest booking in the system, the receptionist confirms with the guest the room type, length of stay. The staff then update the information from the passport or ID of the guest to the guest folio in the PMS, check the payment status and charge the guest if needed and make the room key. Next step, the ID or passport returns to the guest with the room key. The staff show the room number and the direction to the room, confirm again the length of stay, check out time, introduce the facilities at the hostel. In the end, the staff can press check in the PMS system.

- Occupancy

During this stage, the guest may stop by the Front Desk some time. They may ask the question regarding the hotel schedule, their stays, or travel guidance. Customers can also buy or rent some hostel amenities such as slippers, towel, or laundry service. Hostel X receptionist in charge records the transaction to the guest folio in the PMS.

In addition, the front office attendant needs to scan through the camera system or walk-around to supervise the hostel. Sometimes there are problems happen that he needs to solve, he/she can decide himself/herself or get help from the manager for the best solution via phone call or internal Facebook group of the hostel.

- Check out

On the check-out day, the guest must leave the room vacant before 11 am and return the room key to the reception. The customer can store the luggage in the luggage room within the day. If the customer needs information about transportation, the receptionist will check and give guidance. Before leaving, the staff will offer the customer to give some feedback about his stay. The receptionist can mark the guest room on the PMS as checked out and vacant room so that housekeeper can clean the room. Some of the room only available to charge after the guest check out so front office staff needs to check again to make sure that the transaction is completed properly.

5.3 Interview

Apart from the observation the author made when doing the intern at the hostel, he also carried out some interviews to approach different data to have a wider view of the issues

at Hostel X. The interview conducted via calls with the General Manager and two front of-fice personal.

5.3.1 Interview questions

Since there were two different objects of the interview, the manager and the staff, the author divided and adjusted the questions into two different categories to match the objects. The author focus on the four main stages of the job in which the manager and the staff go through to build the questions:

- Recruitment
- Training
- Operation and supervision
- Evaluate and encouragement

A job begins with the recruitment process when applicants are interviewed and selected for the job. After selected, the new employee has to join an orientation period, when they are trained about the company and the job by the manager or trainers. Then the new staff does their job under the supervision of the manager. Evaluate and encouragement are the stage when staff and managers analyze the performance to enhance the effectiveness of the organization.

Questions for the manager:

- Can you share how long have you worked in the hospitality industry?
- How do you recruit the right person for the Front Office team?
- Do you think the current training program sufficient for the new staff?
- What are the difficulties you find in managing the Front Office Department and the hostel?
- What are the methods you are applying to maintain the service quality in the hostel?
- How do you evaluate the service quality in the hostel?

Questions for the staff:

- Could you please introduce your position and how long have you worked at the hostel?
- What do you think about orientation training? Are the training period and the content sufficient for you at work? What did you expect more from the training?
- What do you find difficult at work at the reception?

- Do you feel you were motivated and encouraged at work?
- What do you think should be done more to improve the Front Office Operation?

5.3.2 Interview results

Based on the interview with the General Manager and the staff, the author extracted the result in this section:

- Recruitment

As stated by the General Manager (2020), the recruitment at Hostel X is mainly focusing on the people who have worked previously at the property as an intern. After the practical training period, there is an evaluation of the performance of the person, from language and communication skills to customer understanding and handling the tasks. Therefore, a person with high performance during practical training is the one selected to work as a full-time employee in the future.

- Training

Hostel X applied the on-the-job training method, which allows the new staff to learn quickly and practice simultaneously. The newcomer spends a couple of weeks with the trainers at the reception. After two weeks, there is a qualification test to see if the staff can handle the shift independently, or more training needed. Before 2018, there was not a clear training program, but since then, a clear structure training program gave the new intern a clear idea about the training. But still, a particular idea suggests that there should be more training, especially about customer service.

- Operation and supervision

Cultural differences, unexpected situations and employee motivation are the main concerns. Hostel X is a big accommodation property, and its guest comes from all around the world with different culture. As a consequence, sometimes there are some issues and in case the staff needs guidance, they can call the General Manager for advice or approval and report the problem on the internal Facebook page to follow up. Staff motivation to do the best is the main concern of the management team, so that it may affect the service quality of the hostel. On the other hand, from the staff's opinions, the cleanliness of the working space and the appearance of the Front Desk needs to improve as this place puts a strong impression on the customer.

- Evaluate and encouragement

The management team reviews the guest feedbacks mostly on Booking.com daily. Hostel X also hosts a monthly meeting that reviews and analyzes the feedbacks again with the whole team to find solutions for the issues. The employee with good performance is voted to be “Staff of the month” with a small prize.

5.4 Issues at Hostel X

Through the observation, the author recognized some issues affect the operation in the front office at Hostel X.

5.4.1 Shift time frame

Firstly, the current shift time frame is unsuitable, more particularly between evening shift with the night shift at 1 am. Since many employees at Hostel X rely on public transportation, leaving the workplace after 1 am can be a problem for them to get home and also safety. Moreover, shift changing around 9 am between night shift and morning shift is not effective since the breakfast is around 7 am till 10 am and a lot of guests stop by the reception asking for hotel services or also guests want to do the check out. More or less, the delay in providing hotel service may affect the guest experience in the hostel as well as shift handover progress.

5.4.2 Audit time

The second issue is the audit time, or “roll the day” as written in the handbook. The audit time at Hostel X is done at the beginning of the morning shift, around 9 am. Since the quietest time of the hostel is at night and the busy time start around 7 am, when the breakfast begins and guest may stop by the front desk to purchase some services as well as extend their stay while the system still in the time of the previous day, the receptionist has to note it down and sometimes offer the customer to come back later after 9 am. This issue also relevant to the shift time frame when staff handover the shift. Another reason links to the housekeeping team, they have to wait until the night audit finished then they can get the due out room list and start cleaning the room. Last but not least, “roll the day” occurs at 9 in the morning of the day make the financial transaction does not match with the actual normal day.

5.4.3 Security

Hostel X has luggage storage for guest wants to check in early but the room is not available yet, or checked out but needs to leave their luggage at the hostel during the day.

During the internship, the author realizes that guests need receptionist key to enter the luggage room, but they leave or collect the luggage by themselves, without any documents confirm or mark to prove the ownership to their belongings. This may lead to serious scenarios for example loss or damage to the guest property.

5.4.4 Supervision and training

People working at the hostel after a time tend to lose their motivation, they just do enough instead of their best (Hostel X General Manager 2020; Staff 2 2020). And from the training program, the author recognized that training focuses mainly on the operation and procedures in the front office, only one part mentioned about handling guest complaints.

6 DEVELOPMENT PLAN

6.1 Shift time frame

The author suggests using the traditional shift time frame, with the shifts changing at 7 am 3 pm – 11 pm. As mention by Kasavana & Brooks (2009, 78), the hospitality industry sticks to the basic time frame for a long time: morning shift from 7 am till 3 pm, evening shift from 3 pm till 11 pm, and night shift from 11 pm till 7 am. They also point out that, during peak season, having additional employees support the morning shift and the evening shift, for example from 10 am till 6 pm, will increase the processing speed for late check out and check in the customer. Moreover, it also keeps the shift changing time at 3 pm. Additionally, a suitable timeframe can attract part-time employees such as students, who can choose to work either in the morning or evening shift without scarifying other activities. On the business side, this means that labor costs can reduce.

6.2 Audit time

This author suggests the time for audit around 3 am and 5 am. The audit time plays a vital role in the operation of a hotel. The night audit consists of three main purposes. First, the guest account or folio on the PMS system is recorded accuracy and balance. Second, the night auditor can check the balance of the transaction record in the folio and the income of the hotel so that they match each other. Last but not least, from the data gathered from the night audit, the manager can analyze these data to understand the business and make the needed adjustment. (Vallen & Vallen 2009, 502.) Based on those reasons, Vallen & Vallen (2009, 504) suggest that each transaction to the guest folio, so the audit time should be done when the change as least frequent – “the early morning hours when guests are abed”.

6.3 Security

The author recommends using luggage tag and surveillance camera in the luggage storage area. Based on the author's knowledge, the hotel luggage tag is one of the most important documents for the hotel and their customer. The luggage tag has two pieces with similar information, such as guest room, the quantity of luggage and date, and the legal notice that the hotel is not responsible for loss or damage to the property inside the luggage. The luggage tag works as a contract, or agreement between the hotel and the guest. When a guest needs to deposit their luggage at the hostel, reception clerk writes the information on two pieces of the luggage, one should attach to the luggage, then the guest and reception bring the luggage to the luggage room. Luggage will be kept there

until guest come back and show the card, then the receptionist can come and pick up the luggage with the guest also confirm the luggage and quantity. Another suggestion is, the luggage storage room should have a surveillance camera, in case if there are any unexpected situations, such as guest's property loss or damage, the hostel can trace back and investigate what happened.

6.4 More supervision and training

The author of this thesis recommends Hostel X managers to supervise the staff more frequent as well as training more on the service. The motivation of the staff connected tightly to the service quality as the receptionist represents the hotel. Suggestions to solve the problem are more direct contact and supervise staff performance. The manager should communicate directly with the receptionist any time of the day to know more about the current operation status of the hostel as well as walk around the lobby to check himself. Verginis and Wood (2002, 97) argued that in the hospitality industry, perception of guest reflects that level of service at the front desk is the same to the level of the service of the hotel. On the training, the contents should be customer service and soft skills for hoteliers, for example listening effectively, communicating with the guest or cultural awareness. Training can occur once or twice a month depending on the schedule, or combine with the monthly meeting.

7 CONCLUSION

7.1 Answers for research questions

This research aims to find a plan that enhances the operation of the front office department at the case company. In conclusion, the researcher suggests an action plan for the company that the author believes it could help the company operate more effectively and achieve a better result, as summarized in table 3 below.

Table 3 Research questions and findings

Research questions	Findings
How is operated in the front office in a hostel?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pre-arrival • Arrival • Occupancy • Departure
What are the problems with the current procedures?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shift time frame • Audit time • Security • Supervision and training
What can be done to enhance the service quality in the front office?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider the target customer segment • Determine what the guests desire • Develop procedures to provide what guests want • Trained and empowered staff • Implementation of revise systems • Evaluate and modify service delivery systems accordingly
How to improve the front office operation in the hostel?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Change shift time frame • Change audit time • Use luggage tag and surveillance camera • More supervision and training

7.2 Validity and reliability

The primary sources of the research collected from the interviews with the General Manager and the staff of the case company, as well as observation by the author. The interviewees were informed that their names are confidential, the interviews are recorded only for transcribe purpose. The observation conducted when the author doing his practical training at the case company. Secondary sources collected from books, journals and trustworthy internet pages. Therefore the research is reliable. The interviews conducted with the employees who are already full-time staff and minimum one year of working experience in the hostel, with the interview question suitably modified to the organizational position of the interviewee. Consequently, this research is considered valid.

7.3 Suggestions for further research

The case company in the research is a limited-service accommodation. Therefore, the same research with a different size company could provide a more fulfilled result. The author also suggests research on human resource and staff training in the limited-service hospitality property would be beneficial in the future.

8 SUMMARY

This research aims to find an improvement plan for the front office department in the case company Hostel X. The findings from this research are not only applicable for the case company but also other hostels and limited service lodging as well.

First, the country and the tourism situation that the case company operating are introduced. The theoretical framework is relied on the guest cycle model by Kasavana & Brook (2009, 103) and the ingredients in a quality service system by Hayes and his coworkers (2012, 48). Later, an introduction about the case company with SWOT analysis, customer review and hierarchy chart was presented.

The empirical research part is divided into two parts, observation and interview. The observation part explained the guest cycle in the case company – Hostel X and its daily operation activities. The interview part is conducted with the General Manager and the staff of the case company to find out the challenges the case company facing from recruitment, training, operation to evaluation.

From the findings in the empirical research, a development plan was given to help the case company enhance its operation and service quality. Further research is also suggested at the end of the thesis.

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APPENDICES

Appendices 1. Interview questions.

Questions for the manager:

Can you share how long have you worked in the hospitality industry?

How do you recruit the right person for the Front Office team?

Do you think the current training program sufficient for the new staff?

What are the difficulties you find in managing the Front Office Department and the hostel?

What are the methods you are applying to maintain the service quality in the hostel?

How do you evaluate the service quality in the hostel?

Questions for the staffs:

Could you please introduce your position and how long have you worked at the hostel?

What do you think about orientation training? Are the training period and the content sufficient for you at work? What did you expect more from the training?

What do you find difficult at work at the reception?

Do you feel you were motivated and encouraged at work?

What do you think should be done more to improve the Front Office Operation?