

HYB26

Technology Edition

AI Everywhere



The Hotel Yearbook

Foresight and innovation in the global hotel industry

HY8



The Lobby Boy v2031 or How Hotels Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the HXO

Mid-Stay

Terence Ronson

Founder & Managing Director, Pertlink Limited



Terence Ronson looks ahead to 2031, when frictionless automation will have made most hotels equally smart, equally efficient, and equally forgettable — and argues that the competitive differentiator will be a new role he calls the Human Experience Orchestrator. Part behavioral psychologist, part operational commander, the HXO is the person who reads the AI's outputs and then decides, with genuine human judgment, what to actually do with them.

Picture this. The year is 2031. A guest arrives at your hotel. There was no check-in queue. There was no check-in. The door recognized her. The elevator knew her floor. The thermostat had developed firm opinions about her ideal sleeping temperature and acted on them without asking. The minibar pre-stocked itself with the oat milk she mentioned (once, in passing) to a chatbot eighteen months ago. The AI didn't just remember. It *cared*, in the way that only a system with no feelings whatsoever can care.

And she stands in the lobby, surrounded by frictionless perfection, and feels... nothing in particular.

This is the automation paradox. Not a bug. A feature. A feature nobody ordered.

Which is worth following all the way through, because every guest journey has three acts. The before (pre-stay), the during (mid-stay), and the after (post-stay). The machine has already conquered the first: it books, predicts, pre-stocks, and unlocks doors with faintly unsettling grace. It is busy annexing the second. But the third (the version of events she'll recount to a colleague next Tuesday) remains gloriously beyond its reach. Technology now threads the entire arc of the traveler's journey. The open question is who tends the moments it cannot.

THE GRAND BUDAPEST PROBLEM

In Wes Anderson's *The Grand Budapest Hotel*, Zero Moustafa is the Lobby Boy: omnipresent, exquisitely discreet, quietly indispensable. He anticipates. He intercepts. He disappears at exactly the right moment. He is, in essence, what every hospitality leader claims to want from their staff, and what most organizational charts make structurally impossible.

The idea has been floated: the Lobby Boy is coming back. Not as nostalgia. As a necessity. As the human counterweight to a hotel that has been, with considerable investment and genuine ingenuity, automated into emotional neutrality.

Right idea. The title, though, needs work.

ENTER THE HXO

"Lobby Boy" is charming. It also conjures a teenager in a pillbox hat handing out telegrams. What we're describing in 2031 is something considerably more formidable.

Meet the **Human Experience Orchestrator**.

The HXO is not a concierge. Not guest relations. Absolutely not a rebranded bellhop. This is the person who sits at the intersection of behavioral psychology, operational command, and (here's the part that makes the tech vendors nervous) *the ability to know when to ignore the algorithm*.

When every hotel has adopted the same AI platforms, the same frictionless stack, the same predictive, everything, those advantages quietly cancel each other out. You are left with properties that are equally smart, equally efficient, equally invisible in their execution, and therefore equally undifferentiated. What remains? The human. The specifically, irreducibly, stubbornly human.

WHAT THE HXO ACTUALLY DOES

By 2031, the hotel's nervous system is humming. Every platform is fused into a single data layer that knows guests better than their therapists, and, unlike the therapists, never takes August off. AI agents predicting behavior in real time: fatigue levels, emotional state, and deviations from routine. Obsessively right. Socially questionable.

The HXO reads those outputs. And then, crucially, doesn't unthinkingly obey them.

When the system flags "high-value guest, elevated stress markers, third delay this week," the HXO doesn't fire off a templated sympathy message and log a completed task. They intercept. They read the room. They apply what no model can reliably replicate: cultural nuance, emotional register, the micro-reading of a person in space.

The real question underneath all of it: *did someone actually care enough to notice?* Did a human being look up from the dashboard and think about what this particular moment means to this particular person?

The HXO is the answer made present in the lobby.

THE 60-SECOND WINDOW (AND WHY IT IS MERCILESS)

The modern guest is not looking for a conversation. They are looking for evidence that someone noticed, and then either helped or got out of the way.

The HXO operates on a brutal internal metric: the **60-second window**. Solve it, enhance it, or exit, no third option involving prolonged hovering.

This is harder than it sounds. It requires operational authority to act across departments without having to file a ticket. Real-time situational awareness of the entire building. And, what most hotel org charts are structurally allergic to, the *freedom to act*.

Which is precisely why placing this role under Front Office is a mistake. Guest Relations is worse. The HXO reports to the General Manager or Experience Director, with cross-departmental reach and zero bureaucratic friction. The moment you require an HXO to seek approval before replacing a broken hairdryer, you have missed the point entirely, and probably the guest as well.

THE SKILLSET NOBODY IS TRAINING FOR (YET)

Five things. Non-negotiable.

Behavioral intelligence - reading micro-signals at speed, across cultures, without assumption. The raised eyebrow that means “I’m fine, leave me alone” versus the raised eyebrow that means “I genuinely need help and am too polite to say so.” These are different eyebrows.

Interpretive AI literacy - not technical fluency, but something rarer: knowing *why* the system is suggesting something, and more importantly, when it’s wrong. Loyalty programs get over-engineered and under-delivered precisely when the algorithm mistakes frequency for feeling. The HXO knows the difference.

Situational awareness - full operational consciousness of the hotel in real time. Not the app dashboard. The actual building, with actual humans in it, having actual moments.

Discretion engineering - the wisdom of strategic non-intervention. The rarest luxury in an always-on world is the unscripted moment. The HXO creates the conditions for it. And sometimes the best condition is: the HXO is nowhere to be seen.

Narrative crafting - turning a stay into something the guest will actually describe to another human being. Not “the app worked great.” Something that starts with “there was this person, and they just-”

That incomplete sentence is the whole brief.

Notice when that sentence actually gets finished: not at the desk, but later, over dinner, in a five-star review, to a stranger seated beside her on a flight. That is the post-stay act, the closing chapter of the journey, and it is the one chapter no algorithm can stage-manage. By then, the guest has checked out, the data layer has gone quiet, and the only system still running is her memory. What the HXO is really building is whatever survives in there.

THE ECONOMICS (FOR THE SKEPTICS)

Full transparency: AI will reduce headcount in transactional roles. It already is. The relevant question is not whether, it’s *where* the redeployment lands.

The HXO is not an added cost. It is human capital redirected from low-impact repetition to high-impact moments. Fewer staff overall. Meaningfully higher skill level-measurable improvement in loyalty and the ability to charge a rate that reflects it.

The alternative (full frictionlessness, no human layer) produces the *perfectly efficient, completely forgettable hotel*. Technically excellent. Spiritually inert. Indistinguishable from the property next door running the same platform on the same infrastructure, serving the same oat milk to the same emotionally underwhelmed guest.

The guest, it should be noted, cannot opt out of a hotel that has decided warm human contact is no longer its problem. That is an institutional decision. So are the consequences.

THE DISCIPLINE, NOT THE JOB

Here is the reframe that matters.

By 2031, the Lobby Boy role will no longer exist. It returns as a *discipline*.

A philosophy of practice. A trained, AI-augmented approach to human presence in automated space. An acknowledgment (radical, apparently, given how rarely it is acted upon) that as the industry hurtles toward biological-technological convergence and questions about what it even means to be a guest in a building run by inference engines, the hotels that will win are the ones that continue to treat the person in front of them like a person.

Zero Moustafa would understand immediately. He always did.

The HXO has inherited his brief, upgraded his toolkit, and has sixty seconds.

Don’t keep him waiting.

P.S. The photo below was taken at the Hong Kong Hilton in 1975

