



# Technical Training

## Boosts Your Bottom Line

New technology products and product updates are a fact of life in business today. Add to this, the turnover of employees in the hospitality industry, and technical training becomes a vital guest service strategy.

BY KENT MYERS

**E**xecutives need to anticipate what kind of experience the guest will have making reservations and/or checking in. They need to understand what the difference is between dealing with someone who is trained and someone who isn't. Why? Because these interactions can dramatically affect the bottom line.

The hospitality industry is built on service. When Joe Prospect calls in, the initial image he forms is of paramount importance. If the prospective guest receives slow or inefficient service, he's likely to spend his travel dollars elsewhere.

### How Technology Affects the Industry

The hospitality industry, like others, thrives on technological advances.

Technology has virtually changed the way every hospitality function is performed and experienced. Today, almost every action is automated — front office, restaurant, bar, video rentals and inventory checks. Automation increases the productivity and profitability of an operation by leaps and bounds, but only *if* the staff is well trained on the system.

Technical training for staff is the key to success with new technology. Not only does it impact the company's image, it saves time, and improves productivity. Computer literacy is a must for employees — not only in the systems used for reservations, food service and inventory, but also in Windows, Office, Word and Excel. For example, sales and marketing personnel keep track of information in programs such as ACT or Goldmine. These systems track sales calls, prospect preferences, correspondence, conversa-


tions and call back dates. With that kind of information available, salespeople can achieve more, but only if they know how to utilize the system to its maximum potential.

Computer software is upgraded at least once a year, and because turnover in personnel is common, ongoing training is a must to maintain expertise. Without well-trained staff, the investment in the software is wasted.

### Five Key Strategies for Success

The introduction of technology can boost profits provided there is a well thought-out implementation strategy. These five actions will ensure success.

1. **Budget for initial training.** Once the plunge is taken and an operation is computerized, initial training is essential for getting up to speed as fast as possible. Most software development companies



package the system with a training component; however, some buyers make a common mistake of cutting back on initial training. Trying to save money, the buyer negotiates what he or she thinks is a better deal, a \$45,000 purchase with only 125 hours training. While this might look good on paper, the purchaser creates a disadvantage because the organization will be short on training right from the start. And, that's a fatal mistake. Companies that cut training start off behind the eight ball, and it's tough to catch up.

"Initial training is vital," confirms Todd Callawaert, president of the Island House Hotel on Mackinaw Island. "We went from a manual reservation system for a 100-room hotel four years ago to a fully computerized system. We had 11 reservationists when we were manual. Without the initial training, we would have had a rough time. We were down to eight people after the training. Now, with further training and experience with our system, we are operating with only four reservationists. The best part is that we no longer have any surprises. Our reservations are now 100 percent accurate."

**2. Budget for ongoing training.** Improved technology is constantly being developed. People within the organization move up, and new staff come on board. Ongoing training needs to be budgeted in order to stay ahead of the game. The company's software vendor and other hospitality professionals can provide guidelines, but only experience tells management what the organization's needs will be and how much to budget.

"When we budget for training each year, we look at the upcoming season," said Todd Callawaert. "How much new staff will we be getting? If we have mainly the same staff we had the year before, we budget for a three-day training session. If we have lots of new employees we do five days."

There is a clear difference between clients who purchase training when they have new employees and those who don't. They have a more efficient opera-

tion, and they spend far less time calling for support. When a new reservation clerk is unfamiliar with the system, they tend to be slow handling the guests. Moreover, inexperienced employees are likely to call technical support to ask how to do a certain function while they keep the guest waiting. This is a double-edged sword. Not only are they not doing what they should be doing — taking swift care of the guest — but by constantly calling for support, they drive up costs.

One example of efficiency gained from training updates is when staff learns how to perform shortcuts in a new version. With a property management system, this could include knowing how to load rates and rate changes for different times automatically. This can save hours of work.

**3. Train the trainer.** One of the smartest things management can do is teach an employee to train the rest of the staff. Inevitably during the year, hospitality facilities have staff turnover or a management change that will require new training or retraining. If the organization has someone on board who already knows the system inside out and has been thoroughly trained, that individual can pass on his/her knowledge to others. This individual should be patient, well respected, organized and a good communicator. Sometimes, employees learn more from their peers than they do from outside trainers.

**4. Create duplicity in in-house trainers.** Make sure the organization has more than one trainer. This way, if one of the individuals is busy or not available to train others, the alternate can fill in. For example, often in-house trainers also work in the back office as part of the administrative staff. They may be caught up in audits or loading of new inventory and unable to leave that task when they are needed for training sessions. Also, if one trainer seeks out new employment, the company will always have someone else to take over. This is a safeguard every IT department should have.

**5. Train in a controlled environment.** On-

site training needs to be done in a closed-door environment where each participant has a workstation with the software installed. Technology training should not consist of more than four or five people because learning a software program depends on hands-on practice. In addition, training should always be done in a quiet environment where there are no interruptions. Anything that interferes with the ability to concentrate is a detriment to the training program.

### **Benefits of Having a Training Strategy**

When companies institute these five key strategies, the cost-benefit ratios are immediately obvious. Employees learn shortcuts and advances in the program, and they become fast, efficient and more productive. "You need to look at the long term benefit, not the cost of the training," explained Todd Callawaert. He continues, "Most managers don't get that correlation initially — how can training save you money. They think the cost is too high, but they are not seeing the efficiency and accuracy they gain. We provide incentives for our staff to train each year. The more training you have, the better off you are in the long run — it's really worth it."

When employees are fast and efficient with a system, it's like second nature. Because they don't have to pay close attention on how to work the program, they are able to give their full attention to the guests. When they start to take better care of guests, service levels increase. This automatically has a positive effect on public image. Service, after all, is what the hospitality industry is all about. Guests are looking for a no-hassle, friendly and caring environment where all their needs are taken care of. If staff makes a good impression, guests return often and don't hesitate recommending the facility to friends and family.

This directly affects the bottom line. A long term training strategy is vital for the success of any hospitality enterprise, and it will pay off many times over. ■