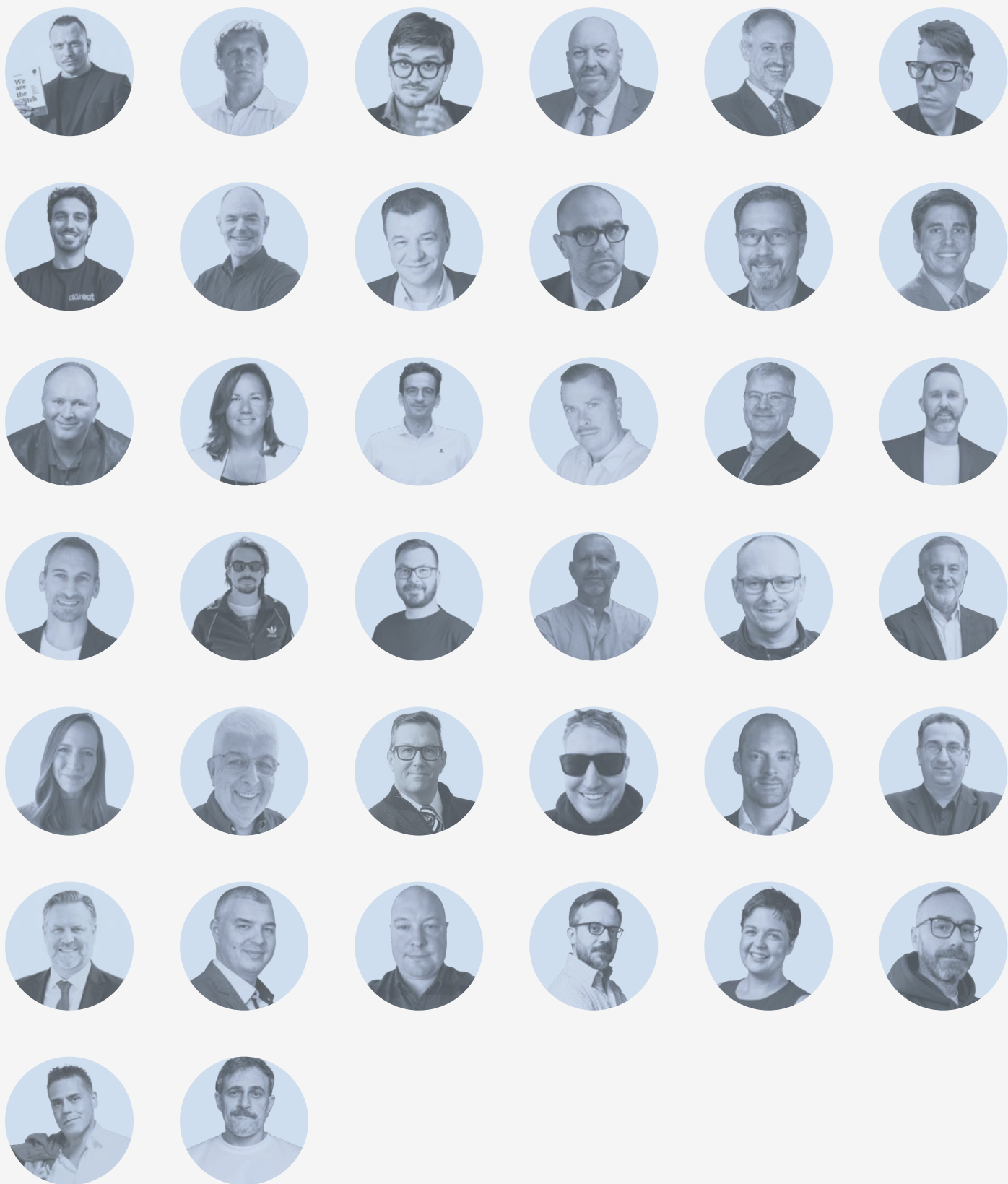


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HY8



True Recognition at the Front Desk: A More Personal Check-In

Mid-Stay

Alan Young

VP, Strategy | Hospitality, Infor

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Alan Young argues that voice recognition technology at the front desk is not a cost-cutting measure but a means of restoring something the industry has been quietly losing: the agent's attention. By offloading administrative commands to speech, the technology frees staff to do what no system can replicate — make a guest feel genuinely seen upon arrival.

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While it may be impossible to quantify in financial terms the impact of making someone feel good, don't think for a second that it doesn't matter. In fact, it matters more

— Will Guidara, *Unreasonable Hospitality: The Remarkable Power of Giving People More Than They Expect*

The ritual of arriving at a place of lodging is almost as old as travel itself. In the inns of the ancient world, a weary traveler was met at the door by an innkeeper who often knew the guest by name. During the Middle Ages and in the grand hotels of the nineteenth century, the welcome became more formal: a uniformed clerk standing behind a polished wooden counter, a leather-bound register to be signed by hand, and a wall of brass hooks holding heavy room keys.

The arrival of the telephone, the typewriter, and eventually the computer repeatedly reshaped that counter. The paper register gave way to index cards, then to magnetic key cards, and, most recently, to mobile apps and self-service kiosks that let guests bypass the desk altogether.

Through every one of these shifts, the underlying tension has stayed the same: how to handle the administrative work of arrival without losing the human warmth of being welcomed. Voice recognition technologies, and the human engagement they enable, are the latest chapter in that long story.

This tension is older than the hotel industry itself. Hospitality has always existed at the intersection of efficiency and humanity. Travelers need beds, keys, payments, directions, and logistics, but they also need recognition. The difference between being processed and being welcomed is often measured not in minutes but in attention.

A guest rarely remembers how quickly a form was completed. They remember whether someone looked them in the eye, remembered their name, anticipated a need, or made them feel that their arrival mattered. Every technological innovation at the front desk ultimately succeeds or fails according to that simple metric.

For most guests, the hotel experience begins at the front desk. It is also where first impressions are won or lost. A long queue, a fumbled reservation, or a clerk buried in a keyboard and a monitor can undercut even the most beautifully appointed property. Increasingly, hotel operators are turning to voice recognition, implementing tools that let front-desk agents check in guests by speaking rather than typing, and turning a routine transaction into a moment of genuine hospitality.

THE PROBLEM WITH THE TRADITIONAL CHECK-IN

The conventional check-in workflow has changed little over the past decades. An agent greets the guest, asks for a name and identification, searches the property management system, confirms the reservation, assigns a room when necessary, processes payment, and programs a key. Each step requires the agent to look down at a screen rather than at the person standing in front of them.

In doing so, the receptionist risks becoming what Simone Puerto has described as the "Reverse Uncanny Valley/Olympia Effect": a fully human employee who nevertheless appears increasingly machine-like because their attention is focused on a screen rather than on the guest. The paradox is striking. As technology becomes more human in its interfaces, humans often become more robotic in their behavior. During peak arrival windows, those seconds compound into lines that stretch across the lobby, leaving guests feeling processed rather than welcomed.

The friction is not only a guest-experience issue. It is an operational one. Slow check-ins tie up staff, create bottlenecks during shift changes, and make it harder to handle the upsells and special requests that drive revenue and loyalty.

HOW VOICE RECOGNITION CHANGES THE WORKFLOW

A voice-enabled platform allows the agent to navigate the property management system through natural speech. Instead of clicking through menus, the agent can speak a command (pulling up a reservation, confirming a room type, applying a loyalty profile, or noting a special request) while maintaining eye contact and conversation with the guest. The system transcribes speech, interprets the agent's intent, and executes the requested action in the background.

The practical effect is that the agent's attention returns to the guest. Rather than narrating what the screen is doing, the agent can simply talk to the person checking in, and the technology keeps pace. Modern voice models are accurate enough to handle guest names, room categories, and routine commands that make up the bulk of check-in interactions, and they continue to improve with use.

FASTER SERVICE, WITHOUT CUTTING CORNERS

Speed is the most immediate benefit. Spoken commands are often quicker than navigating a series of screens, particularly for experienced agents who no longer need to hunt for the right field or menu. Shorter check-ins mean shorter queues, and shorter queues free staff to focus on higher-value guest interactions.

Importantly, faster does not have to mean diminished guest engagement. Because the agent is no longer tethered to the keyboard, the time saved can be reinvested in the guest: offering a room upgrade, explaining property amenities, or simply making the guest feel recognized and valued. Technology absorbs the administrative burden so the human can focus on building a relationship rather than completing a transaction.

MAKING EACH VISIT FEEL SPECIAL

Voice platforms can also draw on guest history to personalize the encounter. When a returning guest arrives, the agent can quickly surface preferences (a high floor, a particular pillow type, a favorite on-property restaurant) and acknowledge them naturally during the conversation. These small touches signal that the guest is remembered, which is one of the most reliable drivers of loyalty in hospitality.

For properties serving international travelers, voice tools can support multiple languages and accents, helping agents assist guests who may not share a common language and reducing the awkwardness of miscommunication at arrival.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR OPERATORS

Adopting voice recognition is not without its challenges. Lobbies are noisy environments, so platforms must be robust to background sound and capable of distinguishing the agent's commands from ambient chatter. Integration with the existing property management system is essential; a voice layer that does not connect cleanly to core systems will create more friction than it removes. Staff training matters too: agents need to learn which commands work best and how to blend voice interaction with the human conversation rather than letting one interrupt the other. One area that will benefit significantly is new-hire onboarding: rather than spending extended time learning a complex platform, staff will primarily need to master a set of spoken commands and understand how to execute them naturally in guest conversations.

Data privacy is a significant consideration. Guests share sensitive information at check-in, and any voice system must handle that data securely and in compliance with applicable regulations. Beyond privacy, ensuring that voice commands are tied to authenticated agents (not arbitrary users) is equally critical. A comprehensive audit log of all interactions must be maintained and regularly reviewed.

THE BOTTOM LINE

Voice recognition is not about replacing the front-desk agent. It is about freeing that agent to do what technology cannot: make a guest feel genuinely welcomed. By moving the administrative work to spoken commands, hotels can shorten lines, speed up arrivals, and reclaim the human moments that define hospitality. For operators weighing the investment, the question is less about whether voice will reach the front desk and more about how to use new technologies to drive a true relationship with the guest.

We need to embrace the innovative technologies that surround us, not to cut costs, but to eliminate the friction between hospitality professionals striving to deliver exceptional service and guests seeking the very best our industry has to offer.

