



Do management systems work?

You may have management software with every bell and whistle ever invented but do you know how to use it all?

TYPICAL OF MY BREED I just can't be bothered to undergo anything remotely resembling formal computer training. But, as the saying goes, don't do as I do, do as I preach.

Today's property management system is so comprehensive and can reach so far into all areas of the business that even those that emphasise their simplicity of use and have versions for the first timer are more comprehensive than top-drawer offerings of just a few years ago.

Hotellogic is a new-ish system whose originator – of the same name – installs the system, configures it to the hotel's particular needs and then trains the staff and managers who will be working with it. That package starts at £925 for a system suitable for a nine to 15 bedroom hotel. It has diaries showing full reservation status, customer information and history files, future bookings with automatic email, fax or mailing of confirmations, flexible room pricing instantly changeable according to occupancy levels and special offers, website integration, interfaces to EPOS, telecoms and accounts, room servicing management, mail-merge for marketing shots, and lots more.

All those files can be viewed every which way, choosing pretty much whatever trigger – date, type, needs etc – you care to select. They can be analysed in similarly



To get further than this staff will need training

Words by Geoff Tyler

diverse ways. The reservation diary, for instance, can show the booking history of the customer, the room, room type, and so on, all before the guest has even arrived and you get into automatic billing, key checks, credit ratings and so on. And for when you're full your system can link with those of other nearby hotels for mutual cross-recommendation of them as alternatives. This can be useful for a clutch of neighbourly small hotels to offer themselves as a single stop for coach parties.

Use it or lose it

The big problem with the capable systems we have today is that as staff and managers change, the less frequently used features drop out of the corporate conscience. For example, it may not be used often but the ability to profile every scrap of business you have attracted for the last five school summer holidays can be invaluable in planning this year's sales effort.

System suppliers gripe that their customers all too often skimp on training; in fact some suppliers, like Micros Fidelio, have addressed the issue by refusing to supply and install systems without staff and management training bundled in. Rob Sheard,

operations manager with Data Basics Hospitality Systems, also a company that bundles training as essential, typified the attitude.

"Customers are sometimes their own worst enemy in sometimes looking to save on training – although the majority do appreciate its importance. Occasionally customers do not always put enough effort into ensuring that their staff are available for training during the installation – although again this is becoming rarer, perhaps as we ourselves now stress much more the importance of the training in the overall installation."

Another is Alan O'Riordan of Guestline who adds a realistic motive for treating training seriously. "We meet a certain amount of resistance from customers who feel they can go live with less training than we are recommending. We do, however, quote for a realistic level of resource (we have to remain price competitive, after all), so we work hard to convince our customers of the merits of investing up front to reap the benefits further down the line. Reference sites are useful in justifying this from their own experience. We will not take on an implementation without a commitment to the appropriate training resource, as untrained staff have a significant impact on our support desk, which can subsequently affect the service our other clients receive." >



Paul Finch at Micros Fidelio leaves no room for doubt. "Most take up all the training that we recommend. Some try to cut down on the amount and in general, whenever this has happened, we end up having to revisit."

Onward and Upward

Training, though, is not a one-off - it is needed throughout the life of the system.

Jarvis Hotels gripped this problem head on and commissioned an outside organisation to handle it all. ATM Technology Management provides all technical support for their 60 hotels, 120 restaurants and bars and 30 health clubs. Property management systems are from IGS Hotel or Fidelio and they, plus EPOS, telecoms and other solutions, are linked to a central office.

Janet Gray, Human Resources and IT Director tells us that ATM provides a 24-hour telephone help desk covering around 30 different vendors' hardware. A resident ATM engineer assists central office staff and undertakes ad-hoc IT support duties. Hotel staff can call about the property management and desktop applications and, if not handled by the ATM team directly, the call is forwarded to the appropriate vendor for action. But, says Gray, "ATM manages all the support calls from start to finish. They monitor the call and make sure that it's resolved within the terms of the different supplier contracts."

In an ideal world that would not be necessary. Users can help themselves, too. Suppliers' training works out expensive if they have to start from scratch, teaching operators the basics of working with computers. There are plenty of



Janet Gray, Jarvis Hotels

Case Study - De Vere Hotels

It is not just staff that change and need updating; systems do too. As software is renewed or updated piecemeal the result can be a mish mash of processing and databases that present their results in many clashing ways. That's when the thorough makeover is called for along with, again, a need for user re-training. De Vere Hotels presents a good example of this in a project to consolidate over 2.3 million guest records from its 49 establishments into a single, user-friendly database. Customer data specialist GB Group did the restructuring using Alterian technology. De Vere had an enormous amount of guest data that it could not analyse quickly and efficiently. The database and analytical system that GB Group designed consolidates this data and empowers De Vere to extract valuable information and identify guests as, for example, 'debutantes' or 'devoted stayers'. GB hosts the database at its premises and the company keeps De Vere staff and managers constantly up to speed on its use.

courses run by local authorities, educational establishments and private tutors that are just as effective for this and much cheaper. To put a measure on their effectiveness, the self-explanatory European Computer Driving Licence, ECDL, is the internationally recognised qualification, run in this country by the British Computer Society. Students need no prior knowledge of IT or computer skills to study for it. Using an ECDL accredited training centre would provide all new staff with the basics they require. The website is www.ecdl.co.uk.

Matthew Bowman at Infodata studies this when recommending training content. "We ask what skills do they currently have? Do they use similar computer based applications at the moment? Are they experienced at their own job - regardless of the computer system? Do they have knowledge of the Windows look-and-feel and Windows applications such as Word, Excel and Outlook? We strongly recommend the European



Above: De Vere's Oulton Park hotel, plus 48 other locations, share the same huge database

Below: The Regency Park is one of several Pedersen hotels where their new PMS system is supplied by Ramesys. The company responded to operations manager Neil Muir's plea that his people did not have the technical expertise for such a large system change. Ramesys did the implementation and made initial training easily digestible, with follow-on sessions



Computer Driving Licence."

Luis De Souza at NFS points out that systems design is the first training contribution. "Get the design right with intuitive software so the user needs little training and have a training mode in the software so staff can do some self learning. Also have context sensitive help, ideally with wizard type functions to make it easy when there is a problem. But also suppliers need to make training for existing clients more affordable. We do this by running courses at training facilities around the UK and in this way the cost can be more than halved by having a small group of clients participate."

Most suppliers we contacted emphasised the benefits of training on customers' premises. O'Riordan at Guestline is most firm on the matter. "We always carry out training on site, having discussed the approach in advance. We specify training sessions of one trainer, two staff with similar skills and experience. The impact on staffing in busy periods

is minimised and the trainer can address the specific needs of the people involved. Training sessions last four hours, the number depending on the role of the participants.

All suppliers we contacted, however, say they have two, at least, spates of training, one before anything goes live and another - a mix of training and hand holding - during the early live usage days. This seems to be the minimum they are happy with whether they are bold enough to insist on it as part of the deal or simply rely on their powers of persuasion. Further training sessions seem to be supplied on an as-needed basis, most suppliers hoping that this will involve only new staff and that their help menus and telephone help lines will do for the rest.

Suppliers start with a standard training syllabus for all, of course, but add customer-specific elements to it. Finch describes Micros Fidelio's approach.

"Packages are based on standard structured content but unique training programs are defined for all clients based on their individual needs. Go Live Cover is then supplied as standard for the first few days of all implementations where we have at least one person on the premises assisting. We regularly return to clients for later training and produce for them tailored Training Packages based on their specific requirements."

When buying, it would pay to ensure the supplier has covered everything you want covered. <