

Information technology and front office employees' performance

Front office
employees'
performance

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Abstract

Purpose – The aim of this paper is to analyze the role of information technology (IT) in the performance of front office employees in hotels. This is done by testing and analyzing up to what level the task performance content of receptionists depends on IT and by testing and analyzing up to what level the contents of the service encounters in which they participate depend on IT.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper includes in-depth interviews with 30 receptionists, using the job task performance model and the critical incident technique in the service encounter model.

Findings – IT takes part heavily in the task performance of front office workers, who rely on IT to get their job done. On the other hand, in service encounters, the value of the human presence is still high, and in most critical incidents, IT do not participate.

Research limitations/implications – The sample was located in the same destination with only two types of hotels.

Practical implications – The dependence of front office employees with IT is so high that some of the receptionists could be substituted by IT in the near future. However, human participation in satisfactory critical incidents is very high.

Social implications – Receptionists should get ready and trained taking into account that the value they provide is higher in tasks that are both not routine and in which face-to-face interactions take place.

Originality/value – Usually, front office employees are managed with human resources view, without taking into consideration specifically how IT has spread into the hospitality industry.

Keywords Performance management, Human resources management, Service encounter, Critical incidents, Information technologies, Front office performance

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The tourism industry has changed profoundly due to information technologies (IT hereafter), particularly hospitality business (Law *et al.*, 2013). Hotels activities are characterized by being based on various and well-known standard processes and operations (Chathoth, 2007). Among these, guest accommodation is one of the most directly and immediately responsible for satisfying guests' needs (Hai-yan and Baum, 2006). In this sense, in hotels, front office employees stand out because they are the main staff in charge of client assistance and the ones who handle most of the interactions with guests on behalf of the hotel.

Front office employees are usually managed through a human resources lens. Human resources practices such as empowerment (Patah *et al.*, 2009), work – personal life balanced schedules (Yuan and Akhir, 2015), pay systems (Alananzeh *et al.*, 2015), personnel selection and training (Baum and Odgers, 2001) and professional development (Hai-yan and Baum, 2006) are often considered as ways of improving front office employees' performance. Nevertheless, research in employee performance – and specifically in the performance of



hotel workers – has passed over how IT can affect most jobs tasks. This is especially relevant because currently the literature provides a considerable amount of studies about how IT is affecting different types of jobs (Arntz *et al.*, 2016). However, we have only found one work that mentions the important, global impact of IT in front office jobs, but this work is dated (Baum and Odgers, 2001). Baum and Odgers found that automation and IT have simplified the role of the front office occupations but have not eliminated them. Additionally, they mentioned the need to integrate both IT and interpersonal skills to reach client satisfaction.

There are many IT options that can be used in front office operations (Bulchand-Gidumal and Melián-González, 2015). Nevertheless, there is no information about how receptionists' job tasks and contents are affected by the spread of IT. Knowing which tasks and responsibilities heavily rely on IT and which do not is important for both IT and human resource management because it would allow hotels to guide more precisely their efforts to improve hospitality performance.

In general, it is considered that IT influences job tasks in two ways: displacing the human resources involved in these tasks and complementing human work (Autor *et al.*, 2003). In addition, recent research about IT influence on jobs reflects that the particular combinations of tasks that conform some jobs can moderate the impact of IT (Autor, 2015). This article explores these issues in the receptionist occupation. Thus, the research objective is to determine to what extent receptionists' job performance depends on IT. A strong dependence on IT could imply that the performance in this occupation could be trusted to technology to a significant extent. Alternatively, a lack of importance of IT for receptionists' performance would highlight the worker actuation in the face of IT.

Recent research shows that jobs may include additional behaviors and tasks than those that are explicitly described (Autor and Handel, 2013). Thus, to represent the job performance construct, we have drawn on two different job performance concepts: in-task performance and service encounter. The first is often made explicit through job descriptions and was chosen because it is usually considered the most important job performance dimension in any job (Rotundo and Sackett, 2002). The second one better captures the hidden or non-explicit facet of service jobs because it is focused on how client-employee interactions can happen. Furthermore, it is an extended approach used to assess the performance of both client contact (Bitner *et al.*, 1990) and tourism employees (Padin *et al.*, 2015). Both constructs complement each other and fully cover the spectrum of activities a receptionist may need to perform. According to the reviewed literature, the impact of IT on each of them can be different, so to not misrepresent the receptionist job content, both have been considered.

Literature review

Impact of information technologies on jobs

Existing studies tackle the issue of how IT is currently affecting and will continue to affect jobs (Acemoglu and Autor, 2011; Akcomak *et al.*, 2013; Chui *et al.*, 2016; Frey and Osborne, 2013). Most of the research on this topic is based on the Task Model or ALM model (ALM stands for the initials of the authors of the model, Autor, Levy and Murnane) of Autor *et al.* (2003). This model assumes that routine jobs have a high probability of being automated, whereas non-routine jobs are more difficult for technology to absorb. According to Chui *et al.* (2016), these studies can be classified into two approaches: the occupation-based approach and the task-based approach. The occupation based-approach suggests that jobs will be affected by recent IT developments. The second approach suggest that instead of jobs, it is the tasks and activities that compose the jobs that are going to be transformed. Although

both approaches differ in their prediction of the number of jobs that will be displaced, both agree on two trends: first, routine tasks have a high risk of automation and, second, tasks that involve social intelligence and creativity are at a low risk of being displaced. The research on this topic is too recent to test which of the two approaches' predictions are more accurate.

Autor (2015) wonders why more jobs have not been significantly displaced by modern technology. Among other reasons, the author considers that jobs include tasks that are tacit and that workers perform effortlessly. Examples of such tasks include using good judgment and common sense and being flexible, which in turn are difficult for programmers to prescribe. Similarly, Chui *et al.* (2016) argue that jobs are usually composed of tasks that differ in terms of automation feasibility. Among the activities that they understand as difficult to replicate by technology, they mention applying expertise to decision-making and stakeholder interactions. The existence of these tasks that may result invisible does not mean that technology does not intervene in them. In fact, it has been proposed that with regard to these kind of tasks and activities, the role of technology is to complement labor, thereby improving the performance of the activity (Autor, 2015; Brynjolfsson and McAfee, 2012).

Front office jobs include both routine tasks (e.g. greet, register and assign rooms to guests) and tacit behaviors such as being flexible in accommodating different types of client demands and judging situations to make the best decision possible (e.g. a loyal client request about the room conditions). Therefore, to analyze the role of IT in worker performance, both types of job content must be considered. In front office jobs, the routine aspects can be represented using the task performance concept, whereas the tacit aspects can be grasped through the service encounter concept. Both will now be described.

Receptionist task performance

Job performance is a multidimensional and complex construct (Viswesvaran and Ones, 2000). One important facet of job performance is task performance which refers to the incumbent's proficiency in specific behaviors that are formally and explicitly attached to each job in an organization (Borman and Motowidlo, 1993). The content of this type of performance can be found in job descriptions (Murphy, 1989).

Receptionist is the occupation through which most front office services are delivered. To explicit information about its job content, the Occupational Information Network (O*NET) is an important occupational description database that provides updated jobs' tasks. It has demonstrated validity in academic research (LaPolice *et al.*, 2008). The content that it establishes for the hotel receptionist occupation can be accessed on www.onetonline.org/link/summary/43-4171.00.

As it has been commented, according to the ALM model (Autor *et al.*, 2003), IT tends to assume routine tasks. Although sometimes it is not easy to decide whether a task is routine, tasks are considered routine if they follow precise and well-understood procedures such that they can be codified in computer software and performed by machines (Acemoglu and Autor, 2011). We can foresee a strong presence of IT in the receptionist task performance because there are IT options that can perform without human intervention many of the tasks that O*NET allocates to the receptionist occupation (e.g. self-check-in kiosks, online check-in, touch screens). Further, the clerical and receptionist office tasks' IT dependence has been confirmed by other studies (Akcomak *et al.*, 2013; Autor, 2010; Baum and Odgers, 2001).

Service encounter

In the hospitality industry, frontline employees are considered key human resources because these employees represent the face and the voice of their organizations to clients (Gorry and Westbrook, 2011). The jobs that these employees perform are strongly characterized by host-guest interactions that pursue meeting clients' needs (Bélanger and Edwards, 2013).

Service encounter is defined as "a period of time during which a consumer directly interacts with a service" (Shostack, 1985, p. 243). Successful service encounters are considered a relevant performance factor for client contact employees (Bitner *et al.*, 1990) and for tourism workers (Lai *et al.*, 2014; Padin *et al.*, 2015). Compared to the task performance concept, the service encounter concept involves more personalized guest-receptionist interactions. It is during these interactions that tacit behaviors that are not included in job descriptions may take place. Thus, the analysis from the service encounter perspective will allow us to take these behaviors into consideration.

Bitner *et al.*'s (1990) model is one of the most cited service encounter conceptualizations because it is totally focused on client interaction. Bitner *et al.* (1990) and Bitner *et al.* (2000) adopt a behavioral approach to study the service encounter. This view is consistent with the idea that job performance must be represented by valuable behaviors for the employer interests. Additionally, it is considered suitable by other authors when they analyze the content of employee-based services (Liu and Tsaur, 2014; van Riel *et al.*, 2012).

According to Bitner *et al.* (1990), client satisfaction in service encounters depends on employee behaviors in three conduct categories: employee response to service delivery system failures, employee response to customer needs and requests and unprompted and unsolicited employee actions. Bitner *et al.* (2000) use this service encounter frame to analyze at a firm level how IT could improve the performance in these three categories, but there is no evidence available at the employee level.

Because there are no specifications about the behaviors that can represent satisfactory service encounters in the case of the receptionist occupation, we cannot foresee their IT dependence. Although Chui *et al.* (2016) consider personal interactions as a type of activity that is difficult to automate, interaction and communication tasks can consist of standardized or non-standardized conducts (Bitran and Hoech, 1990; Green, 2012). The ALM model (Autor *et al.*, 2003), Autor (2015) and Brynjolfsson and McAfee (2012) establish that in case of non-routine tasks, IT is a complement to human work. Service encounter dimensions can involve both routine (e.g. solving a frequent client's mistake or demand) and non-routine behaviors (e.g. facing different guest interactions such as assisting difficult client requests or trying to surprise a client). Therefore, the IT role in the receptionist's service encounter performance will depend on the type of behaviors involved.

Front office information technology options and job performance

Several authors agree that job performance can be understood as a function of three variables: abilities, motivation and opportunities (Appelbaum *et al.*, 2000; Boxall and Purcell, 2008). Abilities and motivation are employee characteristics, whereas opportunities collect external factors far from the employee's control, such as the available technology (Blumberg and Pringle, 1982). Thus, the latter is recognized as a job performance driver. Although service tasks are traditionally conceptualized as "high-touch, low-tech," the spreading of technology is dramatically affecting them (Bitner *et al.*, 2000; Sigala, 2001). There is a significant amount of IT options for front office services. An updated collection of these can be found in Bulchand-Gidumal and Melián-González (2015), whose work is used here to present the IT that can be used by receptionists. These IT options are the following: reception information system, assisted and mobile check-in, alarm, resort customer card,

night audit information system, assisted check-out, luggage location system, lost objects information system, touch screens and information kiosks and customer relationship management (CRM).

As can be seen, the number of available IT options is high and participate in a wide range of tasks, covering almost all the explicit tasks assigned to the receptionist occupation. This supports the need to empirically know their current role in this job.

Research questions

Receptionist is a key occupation to gain client satisfaction, and further than anecdotal evidence, there are no data about the IT participation. Guest satisfaction is of great importance because of its potent effects on recurring sales, word-of-mouth, consumer loyalty and on overall firm performance (Oliver, 2010).

Thus, on the one hand, based on the job task performance dimension the first research question is:

RQ1. To what extent does receptionist task performance depend on IT?

As it has been explained, it is foreseeable that this kind of performance strongly depends on IT because many of the tasks that it comprises are standardized enough to be executed by current hotel technologies. However, there is a need to analyze these expectations because the research available up to now offers little light to the issue.

A different and important way of understanding receptionist performance is drawing on service encounters. Thus, the second research question is:

RQ2. To what extent do the contents of receptionist service encounters depend on IT?

Unlike job task performance, satisfactory service encounters usually do not have well-defined behaviors. The more these interactions consist of typical behaviors, the more IT dependence is expected. When service encounters consist of undefined behaviors, less IT dependence is foreseeable. However, once again there is a need to study these expectations.

Methodology

Because this article seeks to understand workers' behaviors, two qualitative techniques were applied: in-depth interviews and the critical incident technique (CIT hereafter). A qualitative approach based on these techniques enables the researchers to go deeper into the behaviors that receptionists exhibit in their jobs and in their use of IT. In turn, considering that satisfactory service encounters are made up of particular behaviors, CIT is a suitable technique, given that it identifies specific behavioral incidents. Critical incidents (CI hereafter) can be collected in several ways. Because personal interviews were going to be used, these were used to identify the CI. This way of identifying CI has been used previously by different authors (Bitner *et al.*, 1990; Edvardsson, 1992; Lundberg, 2011). In all, 3 interviewers were asked to interview 2 receptionists in 5 hotels each for a total of 30 receptionists in 15 hotels. All the interviewees had a minimum tenure of one year on the job.

All the hotels are located in the Canary Islands, Spain, which is one of the main sun and beach destinations in Europe, receiving more than 12 million tourists every year (Promotur, 2015). The sample was a convenience and purposive one. The destination was chosen not only due to its accessibility and proximity to the researchers but also because it is a major tourism destination characterized by a low seasonality; it is usual that the hotels experience high occupancy rates during the whole year (81.1 per cent in 2015) (Patronato de Turismo, 2015). This makes these hotels suitable units to find answers to our research questions

because the front office services are in constant high demand and involve frequent interactions with guests.

Eight of the hotels are sun and beach hotels, whereas seven of them are located in the main cities of the destination. Thus, some of the latter have a mix of urban and sun and beach clients, whereas others are mostly oriented to business travelers. The hotels have three-, four- and five-star ratings. Detailed information on their sizes and types of operations can be found in [Table I](#). The interviews took place between the months of April and June of 2015.

Sampling was concluded once saturation was reached. Data saturation was identified when, as the interviews progressed, nothing new or different was being mentioned by the interviewees.

In-depth interviews started checking that the tasks that O*NET establishes for the receptionist occupation represented the interviewees' task performance dimension in a suitable way. To this aim, the interviewers asked each of the receptionists if they performed each of the tasks collected in [Table II](#). In case they performed them, they were also asked how often they did them in a five-point Likert scale ranging from very seldom to several times a day. The interviewers also asked if they performed other additional tasks that had not been mentioned.

After assessing that the tasks established by O*NET properly represented the job task performance, the interviewer asked whether these were executed through IT and, if this was the case, the particular IT option used. Additionally, and to determine the extent to which task performance depends on IT, two questions were formulated for each task: If currently it was possible to perform the task without any IT support and if the current IT did not run properly, whether it was possible to deliver a good performance in the task.

According to [Flanagan \(1954\)](#), the essence of the CIT is that interviewers do not get involved in complex evaluations of reporters' answers. Therefore, interviewers learned [Bitner *et al.*'s \(1990\)](#) service encounter frame and a deductive approach in the CI elicitation process was followed. This view about the CI discovering is considered a common variant of the original CIT ([Gogan and Karra, 2015](#)).

According to [Bitner *et al.*'s \(1990\)](#) work, to qualify as critical, an incident had to meet the following four criteria:

Stars	Type	Rooms	Type of operation
5	Sun and beach	More than 400	International chain
4	Sun and beach	Between 200 and 399	National chain
5	Sun and beach	Between 200 and 399	International chain
4	Sun and beach	More than 400	International chain
4	Sun and beach	Between 200 and 399	International chain
4	Sun and beach	More than 400	National chain
4	Sun and beach	Between 200 and 399	National chain
4	Sun and beach	Between 200 and 399	International chain
4	Sun and beach/business	Between 200 and 399	International chain
4	Urban	Between 200 and 399	International chain
4	Urban	Under 200	Independent
4	Sun and beach/urban	Between 200 and 399	International chain
3	Sun and beach/urban	Under 200	International chain
3	Sun and beach/urban	Under 200	Independent
5	Sun and beach/urban	Between 200 and 399	Independent

Table I.
Hotels in the sample

Table II.

Hotel, motel and
resort desk clerks
(code: 43-4081.00)
tasks according to
O*NET

Code	Task description
1	Greet, register and assign rooms to guests of hotels or motels
2	Verify customers' credit and establish how the customer will pay for the accommodation
3	Contact housekeeping or maintenance staff when guests report problems
4	Make and confirm reservations
5	Issue room keys
6	To escort instructions to bellhops
7	Keep records of room availability and guests' accounts, manually or using computers
8	Perform bookkeeping activities, such as balancing accounts and conducting nightly audits
9	Post charges, such as those for rooms, food, liquor or telephone calls, to ledgers, manually or by using computers
10	Compute bills, collect payments and make change for guests
11	Record guest comments or complaints, referring customers to managers as necessary
12	Review accounts and charges with guests during the check-out process
13	Transmit and receive messages, using telephones or telephone switchboards
14	Advise housekeeping staff when rooms have been vacated and are ready for cleaning
15	Answer inquiries pertaining to hotel services, guest registration and travel directions or make recommendations regarding shopping, dining or entertainment
16	Deposit guests' valuables in hotel safes or safe deposit boxes
17	Clean and maintain lobby and common areas, such as restocking supplies and watering plants
18	Arrange tours, taxis or restaurant reservations for customers

Source: [www.onetonline.org/\[1\]](http://www.onetonline.org/[1])

- (1) involving receptionist-client interaction;
- (2) being very significant from the client's point of view;
- (3) being a discrete episode; and
- (4) having sufficient detail to be visualized by the interviewer.

Following these authors' procedure, specific questions around the three service encounter dimensions that lead to relevant client experiences were elaborated:

- Think of situations in which, during a client interaction about (a service delivery failure/a client request), IT contributed to getting a particularly satisfied or a particularly dissatisfied client/Think of situations in which during a client interaction you behaved spontaneously and the IT you used contributed to getting a particularly satisfied or a particularly dissatisfied client.
- When did the incident happen?
- What specific circumstances led up to this situation?
- Exactly what did you do?
- What was the key result that made you feel the interaction was satisfying/dissatisfying?

Once these CI were reviewed, the receptionists were requested to give an approximate reference of how frequent these incidents in which IT was involved were in relation to the total number of guest-related CI. To facilitate the analysis and coding of the CI, interviewers wrote down the incidents following this simple model (Edvardsson, 1992): cause → behavior → result. A pretest of three interviews was done to check the questions' suitability.

Based on Bitner *et al.*'s (1990) framework, a deductive content analysis of the incidents reported was conducted following the suggestions of Neuendorf (2002). When the interviews ended, all the incidents registered were collected without attaching them to a particular service encounter dimension. To increase the code reliability, the three interviewers and another researcher classified independently each one of the CI into the three service encounter dimensions. When the four codes did not coincide (18.2 per cent of the incidents), discrepancies were discussed to reach consensus. Consensus was demanded for an incident to be included in a category. All the collected incidents were classified without discrepancies.

Results

Receptionist task performance and information technology

All the receptionists agreed that the O*NET's tasks represented their jobs in a suitable way. Only two of the 18 tasks were not performed by all the receptionists: task 6 in Table I (only two performed it) and task 17 (none of the receptionists performed it). The other 16 tasks were performed by all the receptionists. Four of these tasks were performed several times a week (tasks 3, 8, 11 and 16), whereas the rest were performed several times a day. None of the receptionists stated other additional tasks.

For each of the tasks, Table III collects the IT options used by the receptionists and a summary of the answers to the two questions that sought to determine the receptionist task performance dependence on IT.

Out of the 16 tasks that were performed by the interviewees, only three did not have an associated IT option (tasks 13, 16 and 18). Task 11 had two IT options, but in most of the cases, IT was not used. Task 15 had different technologies, but it was also frequently performed without IT because it involved face-to-face interactions. In respect to reaching a high performance in these two tasks (11 and 15), only the in-person facet of task 15 can be performed at a suitable level if the IT does not run properly. Task 11 can be processed manually, but interviewees that did it by means of IT considered that doing so manually would not allow an effective spreading among hotel's employees in charge of clients' complaints or suggestions. Thus, out of the 13 tasks with an associated IT option, 12 need a proper operation of IT to be fulfilled adequately.

Service encounter and information technology

In all, 22 CI in which IT was involved were mentioned. Nine belonged to the employee response to service delivery system failures dimension of service encounter, seven fitted the employee response to customer needs and requests dimension and six belonged to the unprompted and unsolicited employee actions dimension. Regarding the frequency that the CI in which IT took part in relation to the total number of CI that they usually had to deal with, all the receptionists agreed that it was extremely low, almost insignificant.

Table IV shows the CI related to the employee response to service delivery system failures. All the receptionists reported the use of IT to solve failures related to client disappointments regarding their room expectations (Incidents 1 and 2). Interviewees emphasized that in these situations, client satisfaction depended on the promptness of the solution to the failure. This solution was influenced by the IT functionalities, but it also depended on the availability of rooms in the hotel. Thus, regarding incidents number 1 and 2 if all the desired rooms were occupied, client satisfaction would be low no matter the IT agility. Further, incident number 2 ended with client satisfaction if the client did not have to pay an extra amount for a room as the one expected. If this payment was requested, client satisfaction was lower.

Task code ^a	IT options that can be used and % of receptionists that use them	Question 1 – can the task be performed without IT?	Question 2 – can good performance be achieved if IT does not perform properly?
1	Assisted check-in (100%) Mobile check-in (6.7%)	Possible during a short period of time and for individual clients. The service would be slower and queues would be produced	No, the service would be too slow and there would be mistakes that influence other facets of the client's stay
2	Assisted check-in (100%)	Virtually no one uses other payment options apart from credit cards. Thus, it is not possible to do this task without IT	Only if the client pays by cash. There is no other way to determine client's credit because it depends on IT to make a charge on the credit card
3	Reception system (66.7%) Formal chat (20%)	Possible for specific emergencies because the phone can be used. Not for regular maintenance issues because IT provides a centralized, shared and formal space for registering them	No, only emergencies would be solved. The other maintenance necessities should be registered in order for supervisors to take them into consideration at other times
4	Reception system (100%) E-mail (100%)	Not possible because reservations are IT based. Only possible if there is a certainty that the expected occupation level in the requested dates is going to be very low	No, making reservations depends on the reception system and revenues depend on the amount of reservations. If the problem is only related to Internet connection, confirmation can be done through phone
5	Resort customer card (100%)	No, issuing room keys depends on IT	No, because keys will not run
6	Not performed		
7	Reception system (100%)	It is possible to do it, but it would be inefficient because computers are faster and have more capacity	No. If the reception system does not manage appropriately, the information would be unreliable for making decisions
8	Reception system (100%) Night audit system (100%)	It is possible to do it, but it would be inefficient because computers are faster and have more capacity	No. These tasks are IT-based ones and are connected with other departments' programs. These actions are inputs for the accounting department
9	Reception system (100%)	It is possible to do it, but it would be inefficient because computers are faster and have more capacity	No. These tasks are IT-based ones and are connected with other departments' programs. There is no way to register accurate information about client consumption
10	Reception system (100%)	If clients have made consumptions at the hotel it is impossible. Bill preparation and payments depend on IT and require information from other departments. It is very difficult to know if the guest has made consumptions without IT	No. There is no other way to get the information about client expenses at the hotel

Table III.
Receptionists task
performance and IT
(continued)

Table III.

Task code ^a	IT options that can be used and % of receptionists that use them	Question 1 – can the task be performed without IT?	Question 2 – can good performance be achieved if IT does not perform properly?
11	CRM (33.3%) Shared spreadsheet (26.7%)	Recording guest comments and complaints can be done manually. However, their usefulness depends on their effective delivery. IT is not necessary to refer clients to managers when they require it	Putting clients in touch with managers does not require IT. If the IT system does not appropriately communicate client comments or complaints, those in charge of the involved services will not be aware
12	Assisted check-out (100%)	It is usually performed with the use of IT because, as in task 10, it would not be possible to know guest consumptions	No. There is no other way to get the information about client expenses at the hotel
13	No IT to support this task		
14	Reception system (66.7%) Formal chat (20%)	Possible for specific cases because the phone can be used. On a regular basis, it would be very inefficient	No. It is frequent that occupancy rate is high and that guests arrive at different times of the day. Thus, it is very important that rooms are cleaned as soon as possible and that once a room is ready, the other departments get the information promptly
15	Hotel website (50%) E-mail (100%) The Internet (20%)	Yes. During the client stay most of the required information is verbal and receptionists know this If the webpage is not available, specific information can be written on a piece of paper. If there is no Internet connection, receptionist can call clients Yes. Destination maps are used to mark recommended places and means of transport	Most of the information is given directly by the receptionists. It would be possible to work appropriately without IT. Only cross-selling and upselling through e-mail need hotel website support Yes. Most of client questions can be answered without internet
16	No IT to support this task		
17	Not performed		
18	No IT to support this task		

Note: ^aTask codes and descriptions are available in [Table I](#)

By the same token, in incidents number 3, 4 and 5, IT was involved, but the quick solution also depended on the existence of a room ready to use. Incidents 6 to 9 were solved using IT, but two other variables were also relevant to get client satisfaction: the fact that the problem was solved and that the client was personally informed about it. Further, the IT presence in incidents where the IT role consisted of a communication means (i.e. incidents 6 to 9) did not imply that different employee behaviors (phone or personal contact) would not have also been suitable.

[Table V](#) collects the incidents of the employee response to customer needs and requests dimension. All the receptionists reported client requests concerning modifications about the planned stay dates. The reception system immediately allowed them to tell the client if the

No.	Cause	Employee behavior ^a	Cause of client satisfaction	Interviewees (%)
1	At arrival, room did not fit the requirements mentioned in the booking stage	Look for a new room according to the client's requirements	Immediate change	100
2	At arrival, room did not fit the client expectations according to the room's published characteristics	Look for a new room according to client's expectations	Immediate change	100
3	At arrival, room was not well cleaned	Look for a new room that was in suitable condition	Immediate change	6.7
4	During the stay, air conditioning did not run appropriately	Change the room to a new one with suitable air conditioning	Immediate change and hotel moved baggage	10
5	During the stay, air conditioning did not run appropriately (but the guest was going to be out of the room for a few hours at least)	Post a warning to the maintenance staff. When problem was solved, inform client and apologize	Was personally informed and when returned to the room the problem was solved	6.7
6	During the stay, room was affected by external noise	Changed the room for a new one in a different location	Immediate change and hotel moved baggage	6.7
7	During the stay, hot water did not run appropriately	Post a warning to the maintenance staff. When problem was solved, inform client and apologize	Was personally informed and when returned to the room the problem was solved	10
8	During the stay, TV did not run appropriately	Post a warning to the maintenance staff. When problem was solved, inform client and apologize	Was personally informed and when returned to the room the problem was solved	16.7
9	During the stay, the hair dryer did not run appropriately	Post a warning to the maintenance staff. When problem was solved, inform client and apologize	Was personally informed and when returned to the room the problem was solved	6.7

Note: ^aIn all the cases, the reception systems were used to provide the required solutions

Table IV.
Critical incidents
related to the
employee response to
service delivery
system failures

new dates they requested were possible. As in the previously commented incidents, client satisfaction depended on another non-IT variable: the hotel room availability. Incident number 2 referred to client requesting information about a particular address located out of the reach of the paper-based maps that hotels had at the receptions. This incident involved IT-equipped clients as well as clients without IT. In both cases, the internet was necessary to assist clients, especially in the case of clients without IT.

Receptionists stated that incidents number 3, 5 and 6 were less frequent every time because clients had their own IT devices. Incident 4 referred to a document that only the hotel could provide. In this case the client had lost the invoice or a change was required. Receptionists stated that the promptness that e-mail allows was key to obtain client satisfaction. Incident 7 involved IT, but could also be dealt with by other means, such as phone or in-person contact.

Table VI shows the incidents related to the unprompted and unsolicited employee actions dimension. In this case, there is a difference regarding the two previous service

Table V.
Critical incidents
related to employee
response to customer
needs and requests

No.	Cause	Employee behavior	Cause of client satisfaction	Interviewees (%)
1	the arrival or before it, request to extend or modify scheduled stay	Through the reception system, change the check-out date	Immediate change (if it was possible to make it)	100
2	Information about an address not present in paper-based maps	Look for the address through Google Maps and explain distance and how to arrive	Got the information needed and additional advice	70
3	Information about flights	Search for the requested information on the internet	Got the information requested	66.7
4	After the stay, request for another copy of the invoice or a modified invoice	Send the required copy/the modified invoice to client's e-mail	Got the document needed (showed satisfaction though an e-mail)	33.3
5	Print flight boarding pass	Offer a computer to print the boarding pass or print the boarding pass at the reception	Got the document printed	30
6	Information about weather conditions	Consult climate conditions on the Internet	Got the information requested	16.7
7	Request a different pillow	Through the reception system, post a warning to housekeeping. When the demand was solved, inform the client	Demand satisfied and was personally informed	13.3

Table VI.
Critical incidents
related to
unprompted and
unsolicited employee
actions

No.	Cause	Employee behavior	Cause of client satisfaction	Interviewees (%)
1	CRM reports a client's birthday	Congratulate the client and give a small present	Felt hotel appreciation	33
2	CRM reports that a loyal client is going to finish his/her stay at the hotel	Give the guest a small present	Felt loyalty was appreciated	13.3
3	CRM reports that a client that experienced a service failure during the stay is going to check-out	Give the guest a small present	Felt that hotel made up for the failure	13.3
4	CRM reports that a client is going to check out after a long stay	Gives the guest a small present	Felt that the special feature was recognized	6.7
5	CRM reports specific data of a client who arrives (e.g., long flight, nationality, etc.)	At arrival, take interest in this specific client information	Felt that had received special attention	13.3
6	CRM reports preference data or special habits of a loyal client who arrives	At arrival, inform client that preference has been considered	Saw that preferences had been recalled and taken into consideration	13.3

encounter dimensions: the cause of the incident is based on an IT signal. The other two kinds of CI started because of client initiatives. Here, the IT (in this case, the CRM) informs the receptionist about specific client information. Consequently, the employee may use this information to surprise the client in the interaction. The percentage of interviewees that reported these incidents is lower than those of the other two dimensions. The reason for this is that not all the hotels had an advanced CRM that produced this kind of client information.

Incident number 1 refers to an employee actuation when the birthday of a client happens during the stay. After the CRM announced it, the receptionist called or texted the client, congratulated him/her and informed about a small present (e.g. a tray with fruit at the room, a bottle of wine at dinner). Incidents number 2, 3 and 4 also involved tangible gifts by hotels. Unlike incident number 1, in these cases, the data provided by the CRM are more elaborated, and only two hotels had such IT. Incidents 5 and 6 are also based on more sophisticated information than incident number 1. Here, the singularity is that employees did not provide tangible presents. Instead, employees show that the hotel concerns itself about the client. It must be highlighted that these receptionists behaved in such a way because their hotels had trained them to do so.

Discussion and conclusions

Conclusions

At the hotels in which the interviews took place, IT intervened in virtually all the tasks that hotels assign to the receptionist occupation. As the literature reflects, hotel reception consists of standardized activities (Chathoth, 2007). In this scenario, IT can assume a significant amount of work and, consequently, what was found is that receptionist jobs were strongly IT based. This also meant that most of the receptionists' tasks had an IT option associated to them and that these tasks cannot be executed without IT. Subsequently, if the existing IT did not work properly, receptionist performance would be low. No matter employee goodwill, probably the job performance would not be satisfactory enough.

RQ1 was to analyze up to what level the task performance of receptionists depended on IT. Because the tasks carried out by receptionists are mostly routine ones, the expected answer was that the level would be high and that without IT receptionists would have difficulties performing their jobs. These expectations were confirmed. Furthermore, because the O*NET database is the result of numerous job descriptions from different organizations, we can conclude that IT design indeed matters to reach satisfactory performance in guest accommodation. This coincides with global analysis about the IT role in hotels (Law and Jogaratnam, 2005; Melián-González and Bulchand-Gidumal, 2016).

RQ2 was to analyze up to what level the result of service encounters depended on IT. A possible lower IT dependence was foreseen due to the fact that service encounters are, by definition, less predictable and less standardized. Here, also the expectations were confirmed. Some of the service encounters described by the receptionists are currently quite routine, thus could be implemented using IT. In other cases, guests wanted to be assisted by humans to complement information that had been found using IT. These results suggest a consequent proposition, which is that depending on the type of service encounter content (i.e. highly routinized vs customized), IT capabilities or receptionists' skills will have more or less importance to achieve client satisfaction.

Theoretical implications

Regarding theoretical implications, the results support the core propositions of current literature about the influence of technology on jobs: routine tasks heavily depend on technology, whereas interactive tasks that demand social intelligence rely more on human

skills. The strong IT intervention in the front office services found in this study coincides with the claims about the displacement of workers by technology (Brynjolfsson and McAfee, 2011). In the next 20 years, Frey and Osborne (2013) assign a probability of automation of 94 per cent to the receptionist job. Nevertheless, if this job is addressed from a job performance view such as the theory about the service encounter content, the employee displacement may be less evident. This consideration coincides with the thought that front-line service occupations involve complex behaviors that are not usually represented in formal job descriptions (Bélanger and Edwards, 2013) and with the belief that most of jobs include different tasks in terms of feasibility of automation (Autor, 2015; Chui *et al.*, 2016).

The results of this research also confirm the role that theory attaches to IT when worker performance is explained. In addition, our findings suggest that IT directly interacts with the other variables that determine job performance. The abilities, motivation and opportunity model (Boxall and Purcell, 2008) is often used to propose particular interventions focused in one of the job performance determinants (e.g. increasing worker motivation). In fact, globally it has been considered that the three job performance determinants act independently from each other (Jiang *et al.*, 2012). In an IT-based occupation, such as receptionist, some job performance indicators should be understood as the result of the shared presence of both worker characteristics and IT. Thus, theory about job performance should consider the jobs' content (i.e. routine tasks vs discretionary behaviors) to propose the roles of both IT and individual characteristics in explaining worker achievements.

The findings also reflect that to analyze the determinants of satisfactory service encounters (e.g. personality traits, IT, firm procedures or physical surroundings) a multidimensional view should be adopted. Our results reflect that the service encounter dimensions one and two (initiated from a client actuation) must be analyzed separately from the third one (initiated from an IT notification). In most of the CI related to employee response to service failures and client requests, respectively, other non-IT factors have an important role. These factors involve hotel status (e.g. available rooms, available maintenance staff, etc.) and employee behavior not related to IT (e.g. calling the client to personally inform about a failure solving). When the hotel status does not allow fulfilling guest demands, it will not be possible to obtain a satisfied client, regardless of the IT used. Alternatively, employee behavior could help in making the client understand the situation through a kind explanation. Similarly, IT allows effectively sending a client complaint to the person in charge, but it does not imply that the problem will be solved. Alternatively, an effective interaction among employees could mitigate a possible delay in the problem's solution.

The third service encounter dimension consists of unprompted and unsolicited employee actions. Here, the number of receptionists that reported IT-based behaviors is lower than the figures in the other two service encounter factors. The collected behaviors were initiated from an IT notification and some involved coordination with other hotel areas. In addition, these behaviors were spontaneous for the client but not for the employees because hotels had trained them. Therefore, both IT and specific human resource practices have a relevant presence. In addition, although current IT can both communicate with other areas and interact with the client (e.g. kiosk, text message, e-mail), in this case, employee substitution is less evident. The reason is that it is surprising when an employee behaves in such a way. In an automated check-in, a machine like a kiosk could make a particular comment about the client's city, but this capability may not seem so surprising coming from an IT machine (Fogg, 2003). Similarly, apologizing through an e-mail or text after a service failure may seem impersonal compared to apologizing in person.

Nevertheless, some hotel managers could think that the contribution of the different human interventions mentioned previously is not relevant for their business because they provide standardized and simple services and that the probability of failure is actually low. In this case of a cost-based strategy or a budget hotel type, for example, as far as clients feel comfortable with IT usage and service failures and client requests are predictable, the literature shows that there is IT that could substitute receptionists and communicate client demands to the specific person in charge of assisting them. Therefore, the business strategy and the business model are variables outside the service encounter that can influence the kind of determinants that should be analyzed.

Practical implications

With respect to practical implications, some actions for hospitality managers can be suggested. Hospitality managers should take into consideration the type of hotel they are running before making any decisions, keeping in mind that IT-based services will provide little differentiation to other similar hotels. Thus, if part of their business strategy is based on differentiation in service, the human presence will be necessary.

High competition makes necessary that hotels deliver high-quality services that impress clients and generate strong client–hotel relationships (Barwise and Meehan, 2004; Klaus *et al.*, 2014). So to surprise clients, hotels must turn to special and unexpected details (Bolton *et al.*, 2014). An IT resource such as a message delivered through mobile phone or during a self-check-in is easy to copy by firms. What is difficult to imitate is employees' behavior (Sanz Valle and Sabater Sánchez, 2010). Nevertheless, employees' surprising behavior must be sophisticated enough to be difficult to replicate. A simple call to a client during a stay to congratulate the guest on his/her birthday is easy to replicate. Another more complex behavior can be more difficult to imitate (e.g. asking a loyal client's opinion about his/her experience with a thematic buffet that was served for dinner the night before). Even a simple behavior may be complex to replicate if it is joined by particular non-verbal communication.

Therefore, valuable employees should be able to surprise clients and should be especially ready and trained to provide the type of attention that machines are not able to do. Thus, hospitality managers should pay attention to their training programs, performance assessment systems and incentives schemes. These human resources practices seek to promote particular behaviors among employees, and they should be focused on situations that demand relevant human interventions. This involves avoiding standard human resource solutions, such as traditional client satisfaction training programs without specific focus or a performance assessment system based on global behavioral categories.

Human performance has always been considered a key resource in services and hospitality (Davidson *et al.*, 2011). This study reflects that receptionists' actuation is in general highly dependent on IT, so managers should think about IT contribution in two ways. The first way has more social acceptance and would consist of analyzing how IT could be used to help employees reach a high performance. The third service encounter dimension results and the possibility of implementing convenient human resource practices reflect that there may be room for this. According to Brynjolfsson and McAfee (2011) and Marchant *et al.* (2014), the second way has been traditionally demonized and would deal with employee displacement by IT because staff cost is one of the main costs in hotel business and IT is continually reducing prices. The choice between the two approaches will depend on business strategy and hotel type. A differentiation strategy in a luxury hotel

will require excellent employee behaviors, whereas a cost-based strategy in a three-star hotel could ignore some employee interventions.

Limitations and future research

This research presents some limitations that can be surmounted with future research. The most important one is that it is based on a reduced convenience and purposive sample of hotels restricted to two types of activities: sun and beach and urban. Thus, to progress in hospitality research, a subsequent extensive qualitative and quantitative research would be required (Rivera and Pizam, 2015). In addition, this work is focused on hotels' front office staff and has not considered other front office employees such as are found in travel agencies or travel companies. These firms are also organizations based on standard operations, so a way to confirm the findings would be to research what is happening with these occupations. Finally, the appearance of unprompted and unsolicited employee actions in the service encounter dimension was very dependent on the hotel's implementation of advanced CRM systems. Thus, in the sample analyzed the rate of occurrence of these actions was low, but this was because few hotels had an advanced CRM implemented.

Note

1. Accessed on 7 September, 2015.

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