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AI Adoption in Hospitality: Meet People Where They Are

AI & Robotics

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AI may be rewriting hospitality's playbook, but the toughest part of adoption is not the software, it is the quiet anxieties it triggers on the front line. By tracing three common fears that surface whenever AI enters the workplace, Lynn Zwibak shows how leaders can turn resistance into readiness and make change something teams help build rather than brace against.

The adoption of new technology based on AI into the hospitality industry is a hot topic right now. We are hearing how organizations are using it for everything from staffing to revenue management, as well as the positive results. These success stories are often followed by a warning that those who don't embrace these new tools will be left behind.

What is overlooked in this dialogue is the impact of this change on the people who will be using it or affected by it. They are a significant factor in the implementation of a new initiative and need to be brought on board early in the process.

But don't be surprised when members of your team resist the coming change. If not handled appropriately, this can doom the project before it even begins. Recognizing that resistance stems from three common fears will help you address them.

PEOPLE ARE AFRAID OF THE UNKNOWN

If you have no experience with something, it can be scary. Team members may be thinking: "Where do I start?", "Who do I ask if I need help?", "What if I mess up?", or any number of other discouraging thoughts. These thoughts are strong enough to stop people from even considering AI's use in their job or organization.

If your team is stuck in this phase, find a non-threatening way to expose them to AI, even if it is unrelated to how your organization will be using it. Provide them with instructions and some prompts to play around with ChatGPT or Microsoft CoPilot. For example, have them explain a project they are currently working on, then ask AI for a step-by-step guide on how to approach it. Show them how to edit the prompt, then add a request for due dates and milestones. They will be amazed by the thoroughness of the response, and how it likely includes ideas and approaches they hadn't thought of.

This little bit of exposure may be enough to get them over the initial hump of resistance.

PEOPLE ARE AFRAID OF CHANGE

Even if people become comfortable with the idea of AI, it doesn't mean they want it to enter their realm. It is much easier to keep doing what you are doing rather than consider doing something new.

Don't ignore this fear. Meet it head-on by acknowledging that things will be different moving forward. Give your team a clear idea of what that will look like, so they don't assume the worst. For example, identify any new skills that will be required, and explain how the organization will support them in gaining these skills. Share what new tasks they will be required to perform, and how they will be measured. Also, provide reassurance about the areas of their jobs that will not change.

If possible, ease them into the change slowly. Don't uproot everything that will be affected all at once. Can you give them a test version of the new technology so they can start with what comes easily, allowing them to build some confidence? Can they shadow someone who is already using the new technology?

Most of all, you, as a leader, must model the adoption of the technology. Share how you are using it in your day-to-day, or how it is being used in other departments. Be sure to highlight the benefits experienced, such as time saved or error reduction.

PEOPLE ARE AFRAID OF BEING REPLACED

One of the biggest drivers behind the fear of change is the concern that it will render someone obsolete. This threat looms large with the introduction of AI. It is hard to ignore the headlines stating how many jobs are being, or will be, replaced by the new technology.

This is a hard one to deal with, because the truth is that some members of your team may end up being replaced. Don't deny this fact. When/if it inevitably comes to fruition, they will feel betrayed that you misled them.

Instead, gently explain that the best way to stay relevant is to embrace the new technology, not resist it. This isn't meant to be a veiled threat, but rather as an inspiration to take on the new challenge.

New technology brings new possibilities, but it doesn't implement itself. Your people are the critical element that will determine its success or failure. Don't leave them out of the equation. Acknowledge and address their fears, meet them where they are, and build the future together.

