



Special Hotels Issue

How do you build a better business hotel? Bob Curley and Dave Demerjian find out what works, what doesn't and what's to come

Not so long ago, hotel rooms were pretty standard, regardless of who was staying the night: You got a bed, a bathroom, a phone and a TV, and that was pretty much it. The concept of the "business hotel" wasn't even invented until the 1970s, and even then, you considered yourself lucky if your hotel had a business center where you could use a telefax or photocopy machine.

To its credit, the hotel industry has made great strides in recent years toward better identifying and meeting the specific needs of business travelers. Check in at any business hotel these days, and you'll find at least a work desk and high-speed Internet access, which has evolved with stunning speed from novelty to ubiquitous necessity. But that's the bare minimum, and business travelers—now empowered—want more. As road warriors continue to raise the bar of expectations, we asked frequent business travelers and representatives from some of the world's leading hotel companies to define the "state of the art" in business hotels—not just what business travelers can expect when they check in today, but which amenities and services are emerging as the standards of the future.

High-Speed Internet

Putting it bluntly, business travelers want wireless Internet access everywhere they go in a business hotel, and they want it fast and free. "Business travelers have come to expect that you've got Internet connections throughout the hotel, from the lobby to the room to restaurants," says Craig Cunningham, vice president of marketing for North America for the Accor Hospitality hotel group, which includes Sofitel.

Shel Holz, a public-relations consultant and travel blogger from Concord, CA, uses Skype to connect with colleagues in the U.K. for a twice-weekly podcast while on the road. He says one of the first things he looks for in a business hotel is a "good, solid, high-speed Internet connection."

Hotels have struggled to keep up with the connectivity demands of guests like Holz. The Grand Hyatt New York, for example, has increased the capacity of its wireless network three times over the past 10 months, according to Matt Adams, the hotel's vice president and managing director.

"We continue to see travelers using more and more bandwidth," he says, adding, "I can see in the future where charges will be based on how much bandwidth you are using." Travelers might be able to retrieve e-mail or surf the Web for free, for example, but high-demand guests would pay a premium.

Bed Wars

The hotel bed wars have evolved into a pillow fight. Since Starwood introduced the "Heavenly Bed" in 1999, nearly every hotel chain on the planet has upgraded its beds; today, you can even find 200-thread-count sheets at Holiday Inn Express. Hotels, however, continue to seek an edge over the competition by improving their beds—and what's on top of them. The latest beds at Radisson and Hilton Garden Inn, for example, allow guests to adjust the firmness to their liking, while the beds at the Soho Beach House in Miami (slated to open this year) will revolve to face either the TV or the scene along South Beach. Jumbo pillows are part of the Embassy Essentials bedding at Embassy Suites, while the "SimplySmart" bedding at Holiday Inn Express includes four pillows in two comfort variations, soft and firm. Even down is out at the luxury Madison Concourse Hotel and Governor's Club in Madison, WI, which spoils business travelers with custom "Sweet Dreams" gel pillows.

Reinventing Public Spaces

Moving beyond limiting wireless hotspots to lobbies, meeting rooms and restaurants, hotels are increasingly carving out new spaces for business travelers to work comfortably.

"We're seeing the rebirth of the lobby to allow more varied space for business and pleasure, with different sections rather than one open space, with public space to meet and nooks to work in," says Roger Conner, vice president of public relations for Marriott International.

Recognizing that many solo travelers like to work while grabbing a drink or meal, Sofitel is looking at including communal tables or counters where guests can pop open a laptop in its restaurants and bars. Starwood recently rolled out Link @ Sheraton, a communal lobby lounge with comfortable seating, refreshments, plasma TVs and free high-speed wired and wireless Internet access, printers and workstations.

"The business traveler who doesn't want to stay behind the doors of the guest room can come down to the lobby and have the same technologies found in the room," notes Conner.

Accor is also launching Pullman Hotels and Resorts, a new chain designed to serve business travelers, and incorporating a number of cutting-edge features, such as lobbies equipped with check-in/out kiosks and "working lounges." Rooms have Wi-Fi, cordless phones and an "office corner" with a webcam and a docking station for various electronic devices. A concierge-like "Welcomer" equipped with a smartphone is on-call to greet and assist business travelers, "connectivity lounges" have workstations with 20-inch LCD monitors, and each hotel includes meeting space and an event manager on staff.

Accor officials say Pullman—already established in Europe, with plans to expand to 300 hotels, including major destinations in the Middle East and Africa, Latin America and Asia-Pacific—is targeted at the upscale business traveler and will compete with brands like Marriott, Sheraton, Hilton, Crowne Plaza and Hyatt.

"Calm is essential when you travel for your work. With Pullman, we have decided to do everything possible to make guests feel as close as possible to their daily environment and make their work as easy and as pleasurable as possible," said Eric Lepleux, chief marketing officer for Accor.

In-Room Work Spaces and Amenities

Flat-screen TVs are quickly becoming standard amenities in business hotels, alongside dedicated (and increasingly sophisticated) work desks. The latest plasma and LCD high-definition TVs have the welcome ability to be used as computer monitors. Marriott, for example, allows guests to plug their laptops in and split the TV screen, using half as a workspace, while enjoying their favorite programs on the other. At the Jumeirah Emirates Towers, located in Dubai's financial district, special "finance rooms" are being designed that will take advantage of the same technology to allow

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guests to monitor multiple financial markets from around the world.

Most top business hotels are now designing work desks with multiple built-in AC plugs and Ethernet ports. Marriott's "Jack Pack," for example, allows guests to connect and charge a variety of electronic devices, from laptops to phones to iPods.

High-end business hotels like Shangri-La and Jumeirah are also equipping guest rooms with printers and even fax machines, thus eliminating the need to visit the business center to complete a simple task like printing a boarding pass. Universal remotes to control audio, video and even in-room lighting are also becoming more popular. "We got a lot of business travelers to admit they work from the bed, and they want to be able to reach the controls," says Conner.

One thing you're not likely to find in the business hotel room of the future: computer workstations. "Guests tend to bring with them the technology they need," says Accor's Cunningham. For increasing numbers of travelers, that means a PDA or phone, not a computer. "I have a new PalmPilot, so I get my e-mail there via broadband," says Javier Salinas, director of international operations for Insteel Industries of Mount Airy, NC. "I don't even carry my laptop with me anymore."

Express and Virtual Check-In, Check-Out

Although often torn between the desire to provide a warm welcome for arriving guests and the need to improve efficiency, more top business hotels are getting the message from business travelers. "One of the key issues for business travelers today is having an absolutely seamless experience, and that includes eliminating the annoyances of checking in and out," says Hans Heijligers, general manager of the Jumeirah Emirates Towers in Dubai. Emirates Towers guests, for example, can check in at a kiosk in the Dubai airport or even in the limo on the way from the airport to the hotel. At the Grand Hyatt New York, guests can check in online starting at 6 a.m. on the day of arrival, then go to a lobby kiosk with their credit card to get their key. "It's like getting a boarding pass at the airport," says Adams. "I think it is inevitable for business travelers to have the ability to log into the hotel from home or the office, confirm their reservation and get an electronic key or barcode for access to their room," adds George Terpilowski, general manager at The Fairmont Washington, D.C. "It's just a matter of time."

24/7 Services

It has become standard practice at top business hotels to have IT-support staff on call 24 hours a day to help business travelers get online, and the number of hotels with fitness centers that allow guests to work out any time, day or night, also is growing rapidly. "Our fitness center gets a great amount of use from midnight to 6 a.m.," says Hyatt's Adams. "Guests may be trying to keep their body clock on European or Asian time, or they're just in from the West Coast and want to get a run in before heading to bed or going out."

The Jumeirah Emirates Towers is used to accommodating late-night visitors. "Most flights arrive here at ridiculous times," says Heijligers. "By the time the business traveler arrives at the hotel, it is often too late to go to bed, but too early for breakfast." To cure jetlag, the hotel's H2O spa has an oxygen lounge, while an hour in the spa's immersion tub is equal to about four hours of sleep, says Heijligers.

The Grand Hyatt New York also is piloting 24-hour "grab and go" food service—a lobby outlet where guests can buy coffee, soups and hot and cold meals any time of day. "It's really designed for the traveler who wants something now and doesn't want to wait for room service," according to Adams.

For travelers who prefer productivity to insomnia, the recently renovated Hyatt Regency O'Hare added a 24-hour FedEx/Kinko's business center. "Business travelers want service when they need it, not service defined by certain time limits," says Adams.

Business-Friendly Food and Dining

Hotel dining is becoming more flexible, not only in the hours restaurants are open, but also in terms of what's being served and how meals are presented.

Sofitel, for example, has won raves for its "30-Minute Lunch," designed with busy business travelers in mind. "All of the courses—soup, salad, entrée and dessert—are served at once in a bento-box style, so you can get in and out," says Accor's Cunningham.

Starwood Hotels recently unveiled a partnership with SuperFoods, a program that focuses on health-enhancing ingredients and "food synergy"—just one example of the lighter and healthier fare increasingly appearing on hotel menus. Taking a slightly different tack, Jumeirah is addressing the thorny issue of pricey room service with a new "convenience food menu."

"Often, business travelers are not looking for a great gourmet meal in their room, just a cheese sandwich," says Heijligers. "We're offering convenience foods at convenience rates."

Special Services for Special Guests

Hotel services for high-end business travelers can often be a preview of things to come for all hotel guests. The Grand Hyatt New York, for example, is experimenting with embedding radio-frequency identification (RFID) chips in guest-room keys. "We have 150 guests who are here two or three times a month, so this would allow them to check in online, get their room number and go right into their room, eliminating the check-in transaction," says Adams. Guests booking executive-level accommodations like Shangri-La's Horizon Club or Fairmont's President's Club or Gold rooms can enjoy a virtual office on the road. The Horizon Club, for example, has a team of personal assistants who can confirm business appointments, arrange limos, print faxes and even help with last-minute visas. Translation and secretarial services also are available.

"You have to have a balance between providing great technology and providing great services," says Brian Windle, vice president of sales and marketing for Shangri-La Hotels and Resorts in North America. Terpilowski says that some business travelers value the staff at the President's Club so highly that they call for advice even when not staying at the hotel. To make rooms feel more like home for repeat guests, the hotel places family photos at bedside before check-in—an extension of the growing practice of using customer-database information to personalize stays by equipping rooms with favorite music, snacks and other amenities. President's Club guests also can borrow golf clubs or workout clothes during their stay, cutting down the amount of luggage they need to carry.

"In our experience, it really is about a lot of little touches," says Terpilowski. "We've created this profile of business travelers of always being in a hurry and not wanting to see anyone, but a lot of them travel so much that the hotel becomes their quasi-family, and they do want to chat with the staff and develop a relationship with them." Women now make up about half of all business travelers, according to Kathleen Ameche, a business consultant and author of *The Woman Road Warrior: A Woman's Guide to Business Travel*, so it's not surprising that business hotels are doing more to accommodate their needs. Responding to concerns about safety, for example, the Eva Floors at Sheraton hotels in India are reserved for women only, and guest rooms are equipped with cameras so guests can get a good look at who is knocking at their door. At the Jumeirah Emirates Towers, the ladies-only Chopard Floor has an all-female staff, as well as special linens and lighting. "You must use your room key to go to your floor, and the ladies' floor has a second access door before you get to the rooms, so there's twice the security," notes Heijligers.

Hotels also are making their public spaces more welcoming for female business travelers. The Westin "Unwind" program, for example, includes evening lobby events geared toward local experiences, such as learning to mix a bellini in Venice or make guacamole in Tucson.

"It provides guests with social opportunities within the hotel, so they don't have to negotiate a strange city," says Christie Hicks, senior vice president of global sales for Starwood Hotels and Resorts. "It has been well-received, especially by female business travelers who can meet people in a safe environment."