

From Concierge to Superman: Perceptions of the contemporary hotel concierge in Edinburgh.

Structured Abstract:

Purpose: To ascertain if the Hotel concierge service will continue to be relevant in a technological world where consumers have increasing access to information about their destination. To trace the origins of the hotel concierge, their route into the profession and establish whether the profession is geographically localised. Their role within the hotel, working philosophy, core values and characteristics were considered in relation to creating and delivering an experiential service encounter.

Design/methodology/approach – 11 participants were selected who worked on the concierge desk in 4 and 5 star hotels in Edinburgh. All were male aged between 20 and 64 years old, nine were Scottish, six of whom were from Edinburgh, one from Wales and one from England. Six respondents were members of The Golden Keys Society. A qualitative approach was adopted with semi-structured interviews designed around key themes identified in the literature review.

Findings – No feelings of servility or inferiority were documented in the employee/guest relationship. Comparisons were made between the contextual setting and the appearance and manner of the respondents with that of a 'performance'. The uniform was deemed to facilitate feelings of empowerment analogous to having superpowers. Technology has been adopted by the concierge department as a tool, but is considered to be ancillary to their personal recommendation and network of business and personal contacts and collaborators.

Research limitations/implications – Changes in the demographics of people travelling and discounted rates being offered in 4 and 5 star hotels has resulted in general perceptions of a less elite clientele. This may have implications for the future of concierge services.

Social Implications – The socio-cultural issues within this study are important. Internet technology is generally perceived to be the panacea of all contemporary communication ills in the 21st century. The authors however propose that the Concierge is the last bastion of front line service personnel who are still approached for their individual, sometimes unique knowledge that cannot be found online.

Practical implications – The internet seems to have opened up this profession to enable concierges to effectively operate in a location they are not indigenous to. The personal recommendations that the concierge provides through their own knowledge are used in conjunction with technology, but are not in imminent danger of being replaced by it. It may prove beneficial for the Hotel to provide some training for older members of staff to keep up with technological developments. This study could prove useful to service providers who aim to gain competitive advantage by elevating their level of guest service to exceed guest expectations through emulating the personalised service that the concierge can offer.

Keywords: Concierge, customer service, host/guest relationship, Les Clefs D'Or, Golden Keys Society

Article Classification: Research paper

Introduction

Stiel (2011) suggests that the hotel concierge is rightly considered to be the epitome of good service by embracing a curious partnership of idealism and realism in order to deliver true hospitality. Their ability to achieve the impossible through their network of business and personal contacts has led to them being termed as the 'go to' people and 'fixers' amongst many other nomenclatures. The concierge desk usually commands centre stage in the hotel lobby and is considered to be a service that is provided to assist the guest in anything they may require or desire during their stay.

The evolution of the concierge

Cacciolato (1937) proposes that perhaps the earliest narrative to mention the role of concierge in Greek literature, relates to a master complaining about his house porter who kept a visitor waiting at the gates on the grounds that he did not recognise them. The first Hotels appeared at a later time when emperors Augustus, Domitian and Aurelian organised stopping places along the Roman roads where hostleries were maintained (Stiel and Collins, 1994). They also suggest that the 'Roman Prefect', who was in charge of vehicles, the provision of relay mounts and supervision of the stations, may have been the first to hold a position similar to that of today's concierge. This tradition continued into the Middle Ages with every Abbey having guest quarters with a monk assigned to attend to visitors' needs. The title of 'concierge' was used regularly from the twelfth century with gatekeepers gradually adopting the term for themselves (*Ibid.*).

According to Chaudary (2009) the opening of Tremont House (The American Menu, 2015) in Boston in 1829 was considered to mark the start of first class service within a modern Hotel. This was a large facility with 170 private and secure rooms with water pitchers, washing bowls and complimentary soap; they offered French cuisine and were the first to employ the services of a 'Bellboy' or 'Hall Porter' in recognition of the need for guest services. Stiel and Collins (1994) state that although by the twentieth century, every good hotel in Europe had a concierge, it was not until 1936 that a social law was passed to pay them a wage. Before that, concierges had provided services for guests such as dry cleaning and laundry for gratuities only (*Ibid.*).

The term 'concierge' can be dated back to 1646 from the Old French word '*cumserges*' originating from the Latin *conservus* translating as 'fellow slave' (www.dictionary.com).

Les Clefs D'Or

An Association for professional concierges officially registered as UICH (Union Internationale des Concierges d'Hôtel), but known as 'Les Clefs d'Or' or 'The Society of the Golden Keys' (GKS) is an International network that started in 1929 when 11 concierges from Parisian hotels realised they could provide better service by working collaboratively to assist travellers and tourists. Current membership reaches to embrace 35 countries with over 5000 members. Their motto is "In service through friendship"

and their aim is to coordinate, promote and assist the activities and interests of concierges; to foster friendship and communication throughout the world; to promote, foster, enhance and improve the technical skills and professionalism of concierges; to foster the development of the hotel and tourism industry; and to maintain the highest possible standards of service for hotel guests (Golden Keys Society 2015). Initiation to the GKS can only be considered by meeting specific criteria; working as a concierge for a minimum of five years within Hotels graded 3* and above, being proposed and seconded by 2 existing GKS members who each have a minimum of 3 years experience, then pass an interview that demonstrates their knowledge of the Industry, their duties, the History of the GKS and a clear indication of what they can contribute to the Society and it's members. There is a code of ethics that the concierge must work within that condones only services that are "legal and kind" (Golden Keys Society 2015)".

Literature Review

Customer experience

With increased consumer choice and competition within a global marketplace, it is posited that customer expectations may be higher than ever. As Rauch et al (2015) observe 'competition among hotels to attract and retain customers is intense and customers may be less likely to return to a hotel if the property fails to meet its customers' expectations relative to service quality, regardless of its price-point'.

It is standard that Hotels and facilities are graded by meeting specified criteria for the tangible amenities, services and facilities that they offer (VisitScotland 2015). It may be easy to measure performance in accounting terms of profits and assets, but the researchers propose that customer satisfaction performance indicators may be more difficult to quantify due to the propensity of services carried out being largely intangible by nature. In his now pivotal work, Bateson (1979, p.139) suggested two diverse approaches to considering 'intangibility' of services and suggest that 'physical intangibility is impalpable or cannot be touched and mental intangibility is that which cannot be grasped mentally' and concluded that – 'the crucial point about services is that they are doubly intangible'. It is proposed that this double intangibility describes the role of the concierge in terms of the tacit knowledge they receive and impart on a daily basis.

According to Pine and Gilmore (1999), aside from the desire of production, delivery and consumption of services, customers seek unique and memorable experiences that accompany their delivery. They further purport that experiences are 'inherently personal and exist solely in the mind of an individual who has been engaged on an emotional, physical, intellectual and spiritual level'.

Gupta and Vajic (2000) observe that although experiences cannot necessarily be controlled by the establishment, they can 'design and orchestrate prerequisites and stimuli' that result in a positive service experience encounter. Given that the location of the Concierge desk within the hotel lobby is often the

first and last stop for the guest, this may be considered as a 'customer experience touch point' (Stein and Ramaseshan 2016). They propose that while 'cues, stimuli and service encounters' may reflect something that is designed for the customer, 'touch points' are the representation of that encounter in real terms.

Ford and Heaton (2000) suggest that today's consumers increasingly want their goods and services to be packaged as part of a memorable experience. Outwith transactional services such as securing tickets, the services that the Concierge provides may be difficult to measure in terms of revenue. The respondents suggest that the Concierge is the face of the hotel and is both instrumental and influential on the resultant experiential value to the guest. Akovab et al (2014), discuss the challenges of defining what constitutes value with regard to customer experience and offer that 'the experience oriented strategy should incorporate customisation rather than standardisation, embrace empathy instead of pure rational logic and use imagination more than stark information'.

This will be referred to later in the analysis section.

The employee/guest relationship

According to Korczynski (2002), the word 'service' shares linguistic roots with 'servant', 'servitude' and 'slave'. Rothman (1998) suggests that the word 'customer' carries the connotation of being served, along with the right to define and direct the relationship, and that service workers often "occupy a role of implied subordination or even explicit subservience". Paules (1991) supports this by suggesting that modern service organisations may actively perpetuate these conventions of servitude, and even create new ones that restate ties of servility from the past. Paules (1996) suggests an historical parallel between the class distinctions defined by the layout of nineteenth century houses, where a master and servant segregation was evident in an 'upstairs, downstairs' format, noting that present day service employees are required to enter by the back door or tradesman's entrance, where the décor is remarkably less salubrious (Quinn, 2007). Nickson and Warhurst (2003) suggest that with the predominance of service employment (particularly interactive front line service), it is now more likely that the consumers of the service products have also had direct experience of providing the service. This inseparability has been described by Baum (1997) as 'democratisation' leading to declining 'social distance' between consumers and providers that results in greater equality between employee and guest, as those consuming increasingly view the interaction in a more empathetic manner.

Personal attributes

According to de Brito (2007) "Most people happen *into* being a concierge". A usual starting point can be as doorman, porter or as a messenger who runs errands and greets guests front of house (Vaughan 2007). Further major attributes are; diplomacy, patience, good people skills, initiative, the ability to juggle

tasks, keep cool under pressure and have a 'computer like' brain for remembering names and faces (*Ibid.*). The suggestion that the position of Concierge constitutes a lifestyle choice as opposed to a routine job can be surmised by Steil's (2011) observation that the job is much more than solving problems and meeting guest's needs. It's about 'gift wrapping' even the most mundane tasks with a stroke of magic to exceed the guests' expectations, being part Merlin and part Houdini. *Ibid.*, subsequently describes the role as being a 'style wizard of information management and a master magician of the impossible'. The challenge for organisations to deliver service excellence and surpass customer expectations is identified by Beatty et al (2016) who consider the sometimes diverse demands made of employees that 'require employees to go beyond their usual job duties'. This has been a recurring theme within this research that will be referred to later in the findings section.

Performance and authenticity

Goffman (1959) suggests that the social front of a performance can be divided into the traditional parts of 'setting, appearance and manner'. The researchers compare this in context to the hotel lobby, concierge uniform and demeanour. Goffman (1959) further states that when the individual presents himself before others, his performance will tend to incorporate and exemplify the officially accredited values of the society, in this case the hotel, more so than does his behaviour as a whole. Park (1950) suggests that it is no historical accident that the word 'person' in its first meaning is 'a mask', but more a recognition that everyone is always, more or less consciously, playing a role. Comparisons can be drawn here with the concept of Goffman's (1959) staged authenticity. Considering that we are becoming less attached to physical work, he states that the performance area or stage can be considered in three parts; front is the area for those who will be 'performed to', where hosts meet guests, in this context the hotel lobby; back is where the 'performers' retire to relax between 'performances' and be themselves. It is considered a violation if a guest penetrates this 'staff' area, but if invited in, moves from perceived truth to intimacy – often considered to be 'seeing behind the scenes' or 'getting the real story'. The final stage is that of 'reality', the division between front and back which is closed to the audience. This area conceals and hides any props or activities that may spoil or discredit the 'performance'. In contemporary society, Mackley-Crump (2016) suggests that staged authenticity in relation to Pacific islanders festival performances, describes cultures that are "rooted in non-linear conceptions of time, where the past is situated in dynamic relation to the present and the future". Therefore, the researchers propose that the 'stage' that the concierges 'perform' on, displays a timeless approach to individualised service, enhanced by the setting.

Theoretical framework

An exploration into theories of gift exchange, Mauss (1954), servility, Korczynski (2002) and performance, Goffman (1959) allow the researchers to draw parallels with concierge demeanour, uniform, salutation and the complexities of the host/guest relationship. The demeanour of the Concierge was examined with particular attention paid to any role their uniform may play in providing symmetry in the complexities of the host/guest relationship. Preferred salutations were identified and exploration into any perceived attitudes of servility carried out. Parallels were drawn between the service encounter experience and that of a staged performance. Clearly the customer experience is important but the measurement and intangibility of the concierge services are not always immediately apparent. The customised concierge service package is not necessarily driven by modern IT support but is a more traditional service style underpinned by tacit knowledge that is received and distributed.

The impact on the profession will be evaluated with a view to ascertaining if it is felt that the role of the concierge may become superfluous, rather than be enhanced by these continuing developments.

Methodology

A qualitative approach to the research was carried out in four and five star hotels in central Edinburgh. “Qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them” Denzin and Lincoln (1994). Subsequently the researchers carried out a series of semi-structured interviews with Concierges in their natural environment – mostly in hotel lobby’s or the office of the Concierge where one was available. The definition of a five-star rating is given as “indicating the highest classification, based on a given set of criteria for determining excellence” (Webster's Dictionary, 2010). VisitScotland’s (www.visitscotland.org) star rating scheme is centred on the hotel meeting the requirements of specified criteria based on consultation with the hospitality industry and extensive research into the needs and expectations of visitors. In terms of appropriate sampling, the researchers were required to approach a number of hospitality networks to make contact with suitably qualified respondents due to the limited number available. The approach made to several contacts was the catalyst for a snowball sample as messages were passed from one colleague to another within this small tight knit community where communication is key Emerson (2015). The selection however had to be considered as part of those whose hotels complied with the grading criteria of four or five star. The sampling frame finally consisted of eleven practising concierges selected for interview. The sample is indicative of the exclusive nature of 5* Hotels in Edinburgh and the rigorous and timely process of concierges attaining membership of the GKS.

The questions were directed by the researchers around the main themes of; the working background of the respondent and their route in to their present role as concierge; whether it is considered essential to be from the local area, the qualities and attributes needed to do the job; the uniform worn and their attitude to servility and performance in relation to the guest/employee relationship

Findings

With regard to the respondents' route in, the findings show compliance with de Brito (2007) as several respondents had started their career as doormen, porters or 'bag boys'. There was an emergent pattern of respondents moving between hotels within Edinburgh, often for promotion to a higher position. The researchers found this to be a convivial, tightknit community that may be connected to the wider network of the GKS. A strong sense of pride and honour was evident by being part of this, along with adherence to the organisational aims of their respective Hotels. The findings show the motto of the GKS (2015) "In service through friendship" to be universally practised amongst the respondents who are members and may be a stronger link than that of locality. R5 reports that he has been offered jobs in London through his membership of the GKS. His initial concerns about not having local knowledge were assuaged by being reminded that "if you've been a concierge in a top hotel somewhere, once you've got 'the knowledge', make the contacts yourself and work on it – it's not impossible". R2 points out that the management in his hotel respects the concierge department and are very proud of them attaining membership of the GKS. He further states that many guests remark on his keys that are worn on the lapel "It's a very recognised sign throughout the entire world - people ask you how long you've had your keys – they're interested, they really are and they do like to see the concierge in a 5* hotel".

There were differing levels of education and experience on entry to the profession, with examples of university and college qualifications; R5 has a History Degree, R7 has a Hospitality Degree, R2 is a qualified joiner, R11, a former police officer and R4 started working in hotels 20 years ago as a luggage porter. Concurring with Stiel's (2011) philosophy of embracing service with willingness and a sense of pride, the main reason given for entry to the job was a genuine affinity with people and a desire to help others. This is also supported by Mauss (1954) and his idea of a reciprocal gift economy destabilising concentrations of power and wealth. In contrast, the findings do not support the theories of Hochschild (1983) that it is common to accept uneven exchanges in your working environment and to be treated with disrespect or anger. On being asked if he considered his job to be subservient in any way, R2 responds "No, no, not at all. I think when you are in a 5* hotel, you find that the guests are a lot more relaxed". R10, who has worked in hotels since the early 1980's observes that it's the traveller that has changed "I think we are more respected now. People travel more, it's not as elite. It was all very much touch your hat, but not now." Every respondent concurred that formal salutations were always used by default. R3 often gets asked by guests to use their first name, but deflects with "something to lighten up, I'll try to turn it into a joke and say 'Oh Sir, if I call you by your first name, my manager will give me my P45!' I see that as welcoming, I'm not bowing down to them, I'm standing up tall, shaking their hand, 'hello sir, how are you?' It is a 5 * hotel". R8 believes this still to be a tradition and that "we are here to serve you know, we still address our guests by the appropriate salutations, it's Sir or Madam".

The subject of locality resulted in differing opinions. Although de Brito (2007) claims that the work is dependent on the concierge operating from their home town with an accumulation of local knowledge, the findings show that many of the respondents who were not from Edinburgh, had been extremely proactive in finding out about the city in their own time and at their own expense as demonstrated by R10 who on moving to Edinburgh from Glasgow reported that for the first 2 months, he “took the Edinburgh tour, listened to them, to all the facts and history. Then I walked the local streets to find out what vendors, shops, where streets were, the most appropriate areas, so yes, I took that upon myself”. R5 who moved to Edinburgh from Wales comments that as a concierge “you need to find out a lot about that area, the history, the country, so you do find yourself learning a lot. I probably know more about Scotland than I do about Wales, purely because I have to, because it’s part of the job really”. It was suggested that those from the local area may become slightly complacent in keeping their knowledge contemporary because of their assumed familiarity. R1 who is from England, recalls the job he had previously where the concierge team was predominantly Scottish and “half the boys had never been to the (Edinburgh) Castle because it was always there”, whereas, “when you go brand new to a place, you visit the tourist attractions, so you see them as your client would see them”.

There were contrasting reports as to how respondents thought the guests perceived this; some respondents claimed that where they were from had no relevance to their ability to do the job. Others claimed that due to the historical and cultural nature of Scotland’s capital city, the guests would expect to be welcomed by someone from that country. Three of the respondents mentioned the effectiveness of sporting a form of [Scottish] national dress. R3 likens his kilt to that of a Superman Cape: “I feel empowered when I put it on. You’re going into costume. I come in here (to work) thinking, I need coffee, I’m so tired, I was out the night before. You get in, put the radio on in the changing room, put the kilt on and that’s it – we’re in 5* mode now!” R11 also wears a kilt and describes how it makes him feel “I’m a very proud Scotsman, I’m a Golden Key Concierge as well and when I put my jacket on with the honour of wearing my keys, my chest puffs out slightly – I’m very honoured, very privileged what I do”. Similarly R2 describes how the general management of the hotel is very proud of his concierge team being members of the GKS and furthermore feels he has the respect of the GM who is also a patron of the society. This anecdotal evidence illustrates well the recognition and respect that membership of the GKS brings to a hotel and that it is supported by all levels of senior management.

It was noted by several respondents that they were required to equip themselves with knowledge wider than the city limits to encompass an understanding of both Scotland and the UK in general, as R6 demonstrates by saying “It’s not only Edinburgh, it’s Scotland, England, Ireland, Northern Ireland, Wales, so a knowledge of that is good as well. Many, many guests come here and want to travel all over”.

The advent of the internet may have made it easier for the job to be done effectively outwith one’s home town by the ability to source information. R1 stated that “There’s no question now that can be asked at

the concierge desk that you shouldn't be able to answer, because you just Google it". R10 describes how he has embraced technology as a tool to enhance his job "If someone asks me about something, I can say 'look Sir, I have experienced it first hand, but there are reviews, let me print that off for you so you can decide for yourself". Similarly of note is Stiel's (2011) observation that the job involves more than solving problems and meeting guests' needs, but also requires the concierge to be a "style wizard of information management", the researchers suggest that the way the information is relayed to the guest is dependent on the concierges' character and personality. As guests may have increasing access to information themselves, this could be considered to be of higher significance than being from the locale.

With reference to Dewey's (1963) observation that good levels of service are dependent on experience and may involve anticipation, emotional involvement and a certain 'uniqueness', the findings illustrate a common theme that the researchers term as 'reading the moment'. This can evidently be seen from R3, who reports that he immediately identifies guest's needs through observation and asking relevant questions in order to deliver 5 star personalised service that will not only meet, but exceed expectations on arrival. The researchers found the generic term of 'people skills' to be used extensively for describing this phenomenon, and would suggest that this and an ability to read body language are inherent traits that are very desirable in this context.

The ability to influence the 'emotional value', Barlow and Maul (2000) is also highlighted by Carlzon (1963) who refers to this as 'moments of truth' and Quinn (2007) describes as the 'wow factor'. This was evident to the researchers who found respondents calling this; a 'gut reaction', the '*savoir-faire*', 'anticipating guests' needs', 'empathising' and 'being a good listener'. A comparison to 'speed dating' was drawn by one respondent (R7) "where you have to make instant decisions about a prospective partner in a very short space of time".

The findings show that although perhaps difficult to define, these traits are considered to be pre-requisites for the job, are difficult to teach and are considered to be of higher value than educational qualifications, experience and articulation. For example R3 agrees that his job is more of a lifestyle choice and sees it as more than 'running about after people all day, it's enhancing someone's life at that moment in time'. R5 offers that 'if you don't enjoy solving problems, finding answers and creating fantastic experiences for people, then you can't do this job...so your basic personality is curious, excited by the unknown and challenges are an essential ingredient'. R10 simply states that he is a 'professional helper, it's what I do for people, I help'. It appears therefore that the concierge has the ability to identify the needs of the customer by observation, simple interactions and their aptitude to 'read' the customer. This then allows them to 'tailor' the advice to a bespoke range of personal recommendations. Respondent 10 spoke of these recommendations that are proffered by the concierge but cautioned that "we are both ambassadors and critics for the city". The general consensus seemed to suggest that the concierge is an individual of

principle who would make recommendations based upon quality and reliability rather than financial or personal gain. This was exemplified by R4 who said “it’s not about the money to be honest, it’s about a relationship.

Rothman’s (1998) claim that ‘customer’ implies being served along with a right to define and direct the encounter and inference that service workers are subordinate or subservient is disputed in the findings. None of the respondents had any hesitation in stating that they never felt inferior to the guests. R5 regards the recruitment process to be instrumental in upholding the standards of the hotel, “because you have to keep that level up, what you are trying to present”. The researchers suggest that the uniform and demeanour are contributory factors to this crucial first impression that is presented to guests and that which has resulted in a more equal exchange in the context of this host/guest relationship. R5 further demonstrates this by his observation that first impressions are crucial in setting standards. With regard to personal grooming, he states “everyone is on show, people look at you, they’ve come to a first class hotel, flown first class, they’re running a business and you know that their standards are really high. You basically have to make sure that your own are very, very high, so the first thing they think is ‘ok, these guys are on our level, they’re very smart, presentable so they obviously take care and attention of themselves’, so they naturally assume you’re going to do the same with their arrangements”. There were several explanations for this, with the main theme emerging as a change in the demographics of people travelling and particularly of those staying in four or five star hotels. R4 suggests that “people in Britain and all round the world have changed. (They’re) not looking down their nose at you – everybody travels now with low cost flights etc. Even the elite have realised they are no different from anyone else”. It may be argued that internet sites such as Laterooms (www.laterooms.com) and Lastminute (www.lastminute.com) have opened up this sector to a less affluent and elite market by offering discount prices on what was once considered to be a luxury, high end product. R7 observes that the accessibility of 5* has changed a result of this by stating “you now get people who are not used to having a concierge there, wondering why someone is offering to help them with their bags and if there’s a hidden catch...”. Nickson and Warhurst (2003) and Baum (1997) concur with this increasing inseparability that may have resulted in a decrease of the social distance between employees and guests that results in a more equal interaction. Goffman (1959) suggests that although the employee can direct the service encounter from first impressions, a ‘subtle aggressiveness’ may be required if the server is of a lower socio-economic status than the guest. There is no evidence to support this in the findings, which may suggest that this particular view is outdated.

Exploration into salutations used to address guests saw a recurring theme emerge that very few were keen to use first names and did not consider the use of ‘Sir’ and ‘Madam’ as being servile, but in keeping with the respect that a guest in a four or five star hotel deserves to be shown. R11 for example, when

asked if a guest asked him to call him by his first name, replied “I would say ‘I’m sorry, I call everyone Sir because everyone to me, is a VIP who walks through this door and you have embodied our company and I believe that you should get some recognition for that”. R10 reports that there is no company policy with regard to any protocol, but always uses Sir or Madam out of respect. On being asked if the guest requested to be addressed in first name terms, he would reply “Well Sir, if we went for a beer, maybe I would call you John, but I wouldn’t want to be so familiar in my place of work”

There were examples of the relationship developing to a more informal level over the course of the guests’ stay with the concierge taking the lead from the guest as to how to direct the relationship. The researcher suggests that a common trait used by the respondents can be termed ‘mirroring’, where they take direction from and reflect the way the guest behaves towards them. Some distinction was made between different types of guests, for example leisure or business. R8 reports that “depending on the nature of their business, if they are here on leisure, celebrating a special occasion, it’s Mr Smith and then, quite quickly, you’ll see, or the guest will tell you that you can address them differently, or there will be a very noticeable acknowledgement or rapport building and you can go to the first name”.

Goffman’s (1959) comparison between the service encounter and the art of performance and his separation of performance into setting, appearance and manner is evident in the findings. Several claims of acting and performing are made, with one respondent equating his kilt with a Superman cape, suggesting that it gave him super powers he would not possess when he is out of uniform. According to R10, “the whole aspect of your appearance is ten fold to the job”. Attitudes to appearance were explored further through enquiry about the respondents’ uniform. The researchers found all respondents to take great pride in their appearance, personal grooming and demeanour at all times. This complies with Goffman’s (1959) theory that the performance exemplifies the accredited values of the society in question; the researchers note that the hotel lobbies are undeniably salubrious. R10 substantiates this by stating “the front lobby is a stage. It’s a performance, I perform all day, I’m talking, I’m involving. My day is about finding out things, arranging things, putting people at their ease and that’s a stage for me and I perform my job”. Stiel (2011) describes the working environment for the concierge as “quite exquisite, with impressive hotel lobbies and elegant décor”. As the concierge desk is mainly situated near the hotel entrance, this may contribute to the association of a dramatic staged performance.

Conclusion and recommendations

The researchers found that all the respondents appeared to feel extremely proud and privileged to be a concierge. There were no suggestions that the job was considered to be servile in any way, and their duties seemed to be carried out with dignity and decorum befitting of their surroundings. Their demeanour and self-esteem are seen to be instrumental in reducing any perceived gap in the guest/customer

relationship. Interestingly, very few of them described it as a 'job', preferring to use terminology such as; 'profession', 'lifestyle' and 'professional helper'. The findings also show that they consider themselves to function as a separate entity from the rest of the hotel, with one respondent describing operating as a 'business within a business'. There seem to be high levels of mutual respect, loyalty, communication and teamwork involved within their department. Findings show that they are all proactive in learning about their vicinity and the researcher suggests that this is due to inherent characteristics of the job being a basic desire to help people, a natural curiosity about their surroundings and the desire to enhance the guest experience in keeping with the service standards of the hotel.

The internet has been embraced by all respondents to differing degrees, but it is used most effectively in this context as a time saving tool for sourcing information very quickly. It was widely ascertained that accessing information is only a small part of the concierge's cache and is something that most people can do. All respondents report that the future of concierge is not in any imminent danger of being replaced by technology, but that they are complementing each other. Although guests now have more access to information, they appear to be looking for the 'real life' recommendation from the concierge. They want to get the first hand experience and intimate opinion from someone who has been there. This may imply that the concierge is considered to have the insider knowledge that guests can trust and respect in their quest to seek out a more authentic experience in an increasingly impersonal, technological and virtual world. The findings show that concierge have embraced technology for their own aims of enhancing the guest experience, but without losing their sense of tradition or personal interaction. In an increasingly competitive and self-service world, this demonstration and delivery of exemplary service may be one of the key drivers to elevate one business over another in terms of customer loyalty and competitive advantage. The researchers ultimately conclude that the respondents carry out their role with integrity, discretion, respect and style, and can be seen as demonstrating the "greatest gift of being ambassadors of their destination" (Stiel 2011).

Further research

The findings have highlighted several areas that could be explored in more detail; the variance between the leisure and business markets was mentioned by several respondents as requiring different levels of service; a shift in the demographics of people travelling and where they stay appears to have 'democratised' the guest/employee relationship; the emerging trend for 'lifestyle' and 'virtual' concierge and their possible impact on 'traditional' concierge services; perceptions of the self service nature of budget hotel chains in contrast to the personalised service that the concierge provides and lastly, the possible consequences of guest profiling on data protection protocol. Although it is a profession that is largely male dominated, there are an increasing number of roles being filled by women which may provide an interesting comparison.

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