AN HTNG UPDATE

Hotel Technology next generation

by Matthew Dunn

Welcome to the digital hotel, where every staff member speaks a different language. Guests patiently repeat their names at each interaction and staff cooperation is near impossible. A few that work together frequently have established common terms—sort of Pidgin Hotelish—but it is neither widely known nor robust. Yet the staff members are skilled and eager, the hotel has invested in training each of them and they are terrific at their jobs.

Improving this situation requires both a common vocabulary and common practices that put vocabulary to action. Achieving this improvement requires multiple participants and steps. Hotel management has to define the terms necessary to run the business, but with the cooperation of the staff who understand the work. Likewise, capturing practices and distilling them to processes involves both the business and the staff perspective.

Nobody would think to approach a problem-set this big by locking the hotel, spending months offsite pouring over fat training binders and return expecting the operation to function. Rather, changes would be introduced on the job, beginning with the best opportunities for improved service and business. Absorbing one change and seeing the difference in the business fosters the appetite to create and absorb more such changes. Big issues are best addressed with successive, and successful, solutions.

Substituting "systems" for "staff" at this mythical hotel captures the big issues in hospitality technology, and the delivery of step-by-step solutions (instead of more fat binders) describes the approach that participants in the Hotel Technology-Next Generation (www.htng.org) organization are taking. And it's working.

HTNG brings together hoteliers, technology vendors and other industry participants to work directly on solutions that address current business and technology issues. HTNG has moved from vision to delivery in just two years, and at this year's HITEC, vendor participants in HTNG workgroups will be demonstrating real solutions to their current and future customers. Hoteliers and consulting members will be on-hand to talk about the opportunities these solutions open up for hospitality businesses.

The key to this rapid progress has been the enthusiastic participation in workgroup activities over the past nine months. The workgroup method has been employed by consortia in other industries to achieve detailed agreements on technologies, standards and solutions for things as diverse as Bluetooth, grid computing and quality of service. Thanks to active coaching and support by The Open Group (a well-known consortia services company in the U.K.), HTNG chartered its first workgroup in December 2003.

This first HTNG workgroup was chartered to deliver pragmatic guidance using Microsoft platform technologies in the hospitality industry. Chaired by MGM MIRAGE CIO Glenn Bonner, workgroup membership initially included technology companies—Eatec, InfoGenesis, MICROS-Fidelio, Microsoft, Newmarket, Springer-Miller Systems and The IDT Group—and hoteliers including Destination, Mandarin Oriental, MGM MIRAGE and Wyndham International. Column space and permission issues prevent a listing of all participating companies.

Participation has exceeded every expectation. The companies and individuals involved have worked together, putting competitive market issues aside to cooperate in meetings, calls and detailed design work. They have achieved agreement on key protocol and messaging capabilities, enabling vastly improved interoperability between business systems and enterprise integration platforms, utilizing XML and Web services working primarily with Microsoft's development platforms.

That is the technical explanation; the digital hotel analogy is a bit easier. The workgroup has agreed on key business data (words), formats (sentence structures) and protocols (processes), which enable systems to conduct a business-rich dialog. The approach enables systems to communicate more as people do, requesting or publishing information based on need in a loosely coupled fashion.

Although HTNG was incorporated less than a year ago, membership is growing rapidly. Numbering nearly 50 members in April, HTNG membership includes hospitality technology vendors, hoteliers, consultants, trade press and academic members. The OpenTravel™ Alliance has recognized the complementary nature of the HTNG effort, and the two organizations are extending reciprocal memberships. The membership base outside North America is growing most rapidly, noticeably among European Union and India-based organizations.

Neither terrific staff nor terrific systems can deliver 21st century service by conversing in Pidgin Hotelish. In less than a year charter HTNG members have produced remarkable results, dispelling long-held notions about competitors and cooperation in the process. To build on this progress and further develop the common language of 21st century service will require more membership and more participation. Members have access to workgroup documents in progress, giving them an early start on compatible solutions and architectures. Solution sets will be released to the public upon completion of the workgroup charter. Members enrolled by June 30, 2004 will be recognized as charter members of HTNG. Enrollment is available online at www.htng.org.

HTNG Meeting

HTNG's progress and workgroup results will be discussed in detail at a meeting and reception Monday, June 21, 2004 at the Dallas Convention Center from 4:00 p.m to 5:30 p.m. For further information see www.htng.org, or contact Matthew Dunn, president of Socratech, Inc. and executive director of HTNG at (360) 715-8741.