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Technological change with workers in mind:

A toolkit for hospitality employers

Hospitality workplaces are rapidly embracing technological change. But this has to be done carefully and with workers in mind. Based on extensive research, this document offers accessible guidance on how to implement technological change, while maintaining good workplace relations and mitigating the workplace disruptions that inevitably come with technological change.

Hospitality employers increasingly invest in new technologies to speed operations, address staff shortages, introduce efficiencies and increase productivity. Numerous technological solutions are introduced in hotel receptions, housekeeping departments, kitchens and restaurant floors etc. From large hotels to fast food chains and independent restaurants and cafes, businesses are bringing in new systems to manage staff workloads, streamline processes, automate tasks and monitor operations.

This often rapid change can be unsettling for workers. If not managed with workers in mind, it can negatively impact on worker well-being, resulting in higher staff turnover and workplace stress as well as affecting customer satisfaction and workplace operations. **But a lot can be done to mitigate this.**

The British Academy

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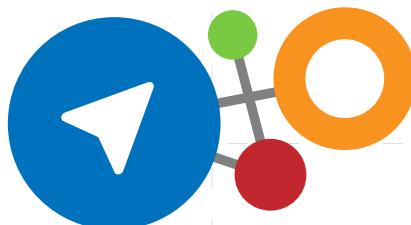
What do hospitality workers report: Key findings from a large-scale study

These guidelines are based on a large-scale study that involved over 60 interviews conducted with hospitality workers (receptionists, housekeepers, chefs, bartenders, baristas, front-office staff), employers, managers, technologists and various industry stakeholders about their perspectives and experiences of technological change and implications. Here are some learnings:

Interactions with customers matter

Workers value the opportunity to interact with customers. This gives them meaning and brings joy. However, interactions with customers are becoming increasingly mediated, or replaced, by technological solutions (e.g. self-check-in kiosks, in-app messaging). This can make their work experiences less personalised and leave them feeling disconnected from their customers, and therefore less satisfied with their jobs.

Technology can amplify anxiety

Workers reported anxiety about new systems being introduced or upgraded, and worried about how this would affect their work. They were often advised late about the changes and felt unprepared. This anxiety was felt by younger as well as older workers, with assumptions made about skills and preparedness.

Competition for jobs

Workers do worry about technology taking their jobs away or reducing the number of staff on shift. Introduction of self-ordering solutions and self-check-in systems can make staff more alert about the future implications for their roles. Workers show a good level of critical awareness and reflection, with many being alert about a decrease in staff on shift.

Intensification of work

Workers report that they have to absorb more work. While technology is meant to introduce efficiencies, workers report having more and not less work to do, and feel more intensity at work. This increased pressure felt by workers affects their well-being and increases stress.

Solving tech-related issues

Workers report that they spend more time solving tech-related problems. While technology is promised to free workers' time and allow them more time for interacting with customers, the opposite is often felt, as workers spend a lot of time solving issues caused by the technology, and as a result have less time to spend with customers.
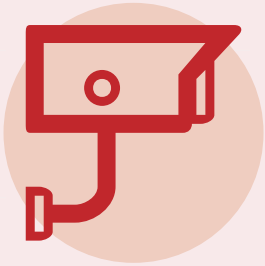
Workplace monitoring

Workers reported concerns about the use of metrics and customer reviews to monitor and manage their performance. This affected job satisfaction and decreased their sense of autonomy, while increasing insecurity.

Not all tech solutions are useful and fit for purpose

While there were tools that supported workers well and simplified their work, many reported that not all technological solutions were useful and adapted to the needs of their workplace. Many tools were not integrated well within current systems or not adapted to the needs of hospitality workplaces, resulting in more manual work and time spent consolidating information across systems, correcting errors. Workers felt pressured to use tools they did not feel worked well.
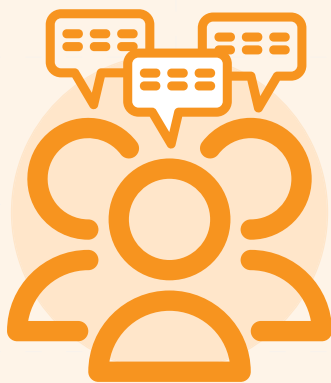
Communication with co-workers and managers

While workers appreciated the online communication tools used at work and acknowledged that they helped them gain access to important information (e.g. work schedules), they also reported that online communication was sometimes overused and replaced important face-to-face comms between workers and managers, making workers feel less integrated within the team. Workers deemed some topics (e.g. discussing customer complaints) inappropriate for posting on group chats and better dealt with in person.

Assumptions made about technological readiness of workers

Workers, both younger and older, reported limited preparation for technological change. Many received insufficient training and thought that e-learning, while useful to a certain extent, cannot replace in-person training. There was a willingness among workers to gain new skills.

Workers can feel excluded from the process of bringing in technologies

Workers did not feel they were consulted about the changes or that their feedback was listened to. They did not feel comfortable reporting tech issues as they did not think it would be taken seriously. They felt that the expectation was to just get on with it, rather than having conversations about the implementation.

Jobs with too much automation perceived as less attractive

While many workers appreciated the technologies they used at work, they were discouraged from jobs where too much automation was in place. They appreciated having technology that supported them rather than intensified their work and created more stress. Some purposively sought jobs with minimal technology (e.g. local pub) and appreciated interactions with co-workers and regulars, arguing that more automation meant less commitment and disconnection.
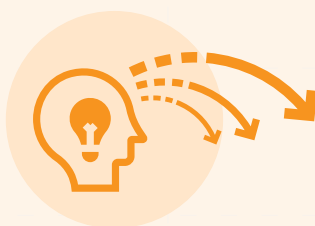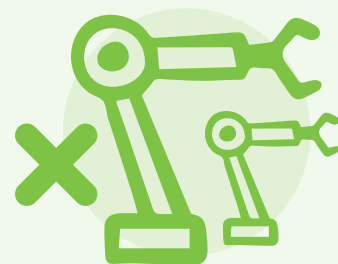
Too much automation can lead to a loss of skills

Workers felt that skills such as barista skills or chef skills are at risk of being too automated in pursuit of standardisation and as a result being lost. They argued that customers appreciated individualised services and products over standardisation.

AI murkiness

While some workers used AI at work and were encouraged to use it (e.g. in reservations for email templates), many were less aware of its use. Some used it at work without declaring to employers, as they were unsure about the privacy and data protection. Not many saw AI useful in their work.

Different groups of workers react differently to technology

Younger workers and university-educated workers showed more confidence and enthusiasm about technology. However, they also showed critical awareness of negative impacts and implications, and valued workplace interactions. Older workers, neurodiverse workers and those employed in hospitality over a longer period of time were considered as those who adapt more slowly and as those who might feel more alienated due to new technologies.

What works: Worker-inclusive ways of technological implementation

Across the UK, in many hospitality workplaces, there are notable examples of worker-inclusive practices where hospitality workers are meaningfully supported to navigate technological change and make most of technological solutions to help them grow and deliver good service as well as supporting their wellbeing.

Drawing on extensive research data, the following guidelines are designed to help employers navigate the complexities of technological decision-making for the mutual benefit of businesses as well as workers. They contain easy steps to support employers and workers with adapting to technological change.

10 questions to consider when choosing a new technology:

1. What problem does it help solve? Will it help save time or add more work?

When choosing a new tool it is important to reflect what problem it's going to solve and how is it going to bring positive change. Reflect on whether it is fit for purpose and adapted to the needs and peculiarities of hospitality businesses. Try to critically evaluate the tool in the context of your needs. It's best to avoid gimmicky solutions and choose meaningfully rather than innovating for the sake of innovating. Technological solutions are not cheap and you don't want to be stuck in something you don't need or that is too complex for workers to use fully.

2. What are the alternatives to bringing in more tech?

Try not to get into the techno-solutionism trap. Be critical and reflexive in making decisions. Is there another way? Many new solutions bring in new problems and can have longer-term consequences. So choose wisely and in consultation. Don't automatically assume more tech is better.

3. How does it integrate with your current systems?

When choosing a solution, consider whether and how it integrates within your existing suite of programmes/tools. If it doesn't, will it cause new issues and require more staff time to do manual tasks of copying information over?

4. How is this tool going to meaningfully support my team?

Choose tools that will support your staff and not replace them or remove tasks they enjoy. You do not want to leave staff with the most mundane, repetitive tasks or solving issues tech cannot solve or caused by tech. Adopt a worker-centred approach when choosing tech. It will help you in the future and the workers will be very grateful and will give back in return.

5. Is it worker-friendly and not only customer or manager-friendly?

Evaluate the new tool/system in light of its user-friendliness, not only from the customer perspective, but most importantly from the worker perspective, as your workers will be the ones who will be using it on a daily basis. This will help you get workers on board, save time and frustration.

6. Have you asked your workers for feedback? Has your team had a chance to test it?

It is crucial to test the tool by involving staff in giving honest (anonymous if possible) feedback on the usability and usefulness of the tool, and how it will affect their work and customer experience. Consult your workers and they will appreciate having a voice in decision-making. Make sure your workers feel valued. Early participation and inclusion are key.

7. Have you spoken to other hospitality workplaces?

Do try to approach other hospitality employers about their experiences of bringing in new tools. Exchange this valuable knowledge and share experiences with others. Foster a culture of critical evaluation of new technologies beyond discussions of efficiency and productivity.

8. What is the opportunity cost?

Anticipate challenges. Consider what the opportunity cost of automating and bringing in more technologies is (e.g. less interaction, less customer loyalty, lower satisfaction, higher staff turnover, loss of skills)

9. Could the new tool/system have an adverse and unintended negative impact on your workers and their wellbeing? Could it be deployed in an unintended way against the workers?

This is a very important and underappreciated aspect. Reflecting on how a technological solution will affect workers and their roles, and what the often unintended consequences could be (e.g. too much monitoring, losing autonomy, depersonalisation, losing opportunity to interact with co-workers and customers) is key. Being mindful of these can reduce staff turnover, and improve worker well-being and satisfaction.

10. What if it doesn't work out? Is there a way out?

Ensure, if possible, that you have options to exit agreements if the tech is too inaccessible and counterproductive for the team and creates inefficiencies.
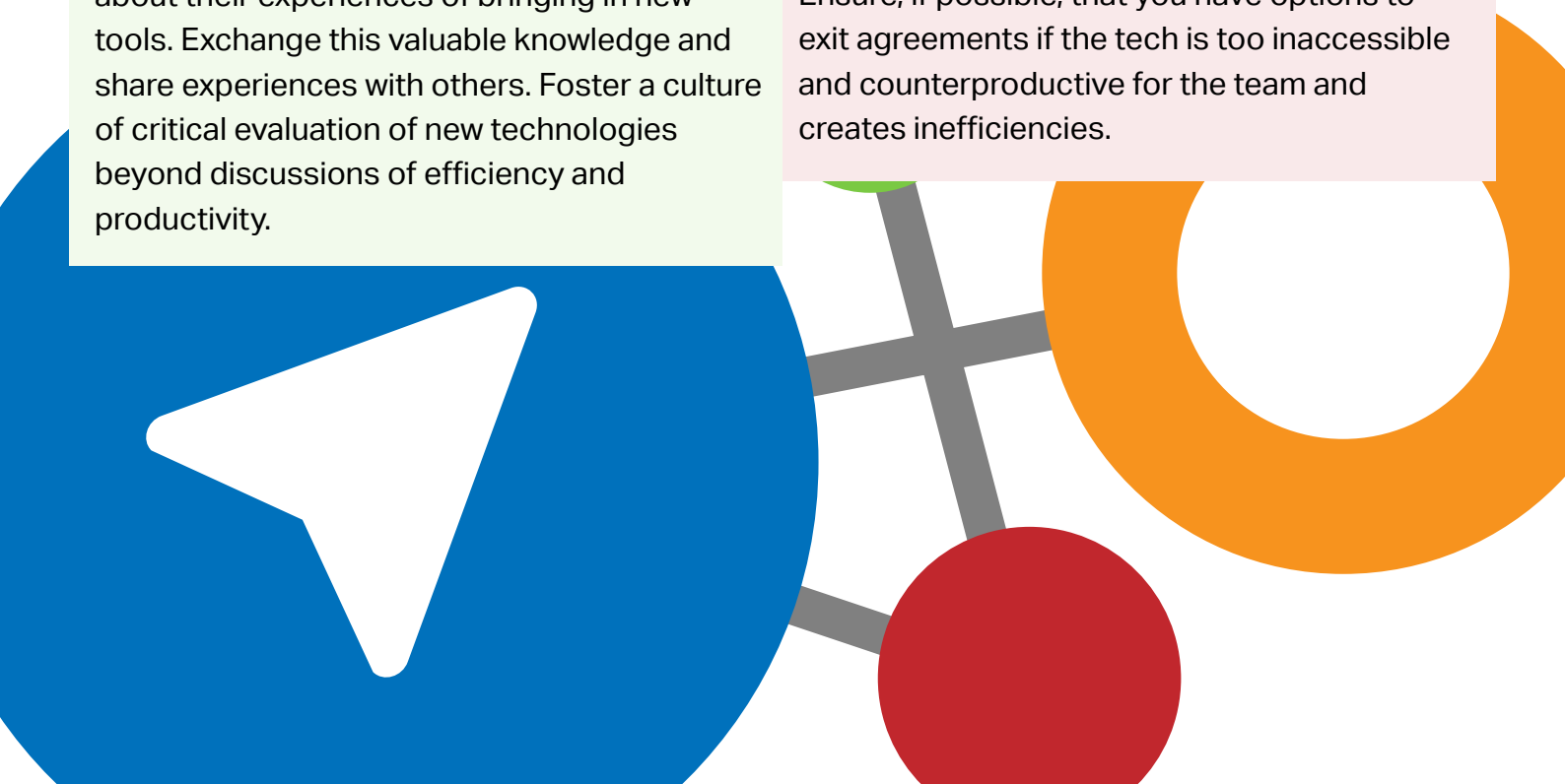
When implementing a new technology:
How to better support workers with technological change?

Prepare your team and build capacity

1. **Prepare your team:** Inform your workers early about the changes. Give them time to prepare mentally and technically. Answer their questions and worries (e.g. are their jobs at risk of being replaced? Will their work intensify?) Work with workers rather than imposing on them. Explain clearly how the new tool will support their work.

2. **Training is key to managing change:** Make sure workers receive enough training. Online E-training is fine but what workers value most is in-person and hands-on training, giving them a chance to ask questions and make mistakes. New tech tools are expensive, but giving workers sufficient training will pay back later with a more efficient use of technology

3. **Support new starters:** Make sure you provide sufficient information and dedicate time to training new staff. Some of your workers may have never used any of the systems before, and it might be their first-ever job. This care-full approach will pay back in the future.

4. **Create opportunities for continuous learning and development:** Enable the development of skills. Both digital and interaction skills are important, one should not undermine the other. Keep workers interested, curious and inspired. As a result, they will stay longer.

Anticipate issues, be ready to acknowledge and mitigate challenges

1. **Anticipate challenges and acknowledge issues:** If the tool is not working as anticipated, acknowledge issues and actively work with the team to provide solutions, giving more resources if needed and helping workers deal with these.

2. **Be mindful of using data for worker evaluation and performance management:** Consider how introducing performance management tools can be detrimental to your team rather than helpful. Numeric performance data has many limitations and needs to be critically evaluated. Metrics are context-blind, often inaccurate, incomplete and fragmented, with numerous gaps and glitches. When evaluating staff performance, nuances and context need to be taken into consideration, and data looked at with a critical eye.

3. **Be mindful of using online group chat platforms for communication:** Online group chat platforms can be valuable communication tools if used well and positively. Keep important information for in-person meetings. This will help you mitigate negative impacts online group chats can have on worker wellbeing (e.g. messages can come across the wrong way, they might be off work when they receive the message). Reflect on how interactions between co-workers and managers are mediated via technology and whether there is enough face-to-face contact. Inform workers about the right to switch off after working hours.

Be worker-centric, flexible and inclusive

1. **Be inclusive:** Acknowledge that different workers deal differently with change and support them through it, e.g. older workers, international staff and new starters might need additional support. Do not assume digital abilities in workers; not all young workers are good with tech and not all older workers lack confidence with tech. Offer support where needed as different groups/workers will react and adapt differently. Be aware that some workers might need more time and support.

2. **Be flexible and give workers choice where possible:** For those who struggle more with technology or prefer alternative ways of working, give them choice where possible and consider allowing for different ways of doing things.

3. **Be aware of potential negative impacts of technology on well-being and mental health:** Be aware of what brings workers joy at work and enable that so that work does not become too mundane and too disrupted by technological tools.

4. **Create meaningful quality jobs to make hospitality jobs more attractive:** Make sure your workers are valued and visible, their jobs are meaningful and challenge them in positive ways.

Observe, reflect, listen and act

1. Listen to your workers, seek feedback and act on it: Action feedback when tech issues are reported so that staff feel they can raise problems. Make sure they know how and where to raise tech issues. Do not assume they will just get on with new technologies. Collect (anonymous) worker feedback and act on it.

2. Drop tools that are detrimental to the team: If the tool is having a negative impact on the team (e.g. not working as expected or causing staff more work), explore ways of dropping it.

3. Get customers' views on customer-facing systems (e.g. digital key cards). Do they want a more personalised contact or prefer using technology? What matters to them? While some customers want speed, others appreciate interaction with workers and a personalised approach.

4. Evaluate regularly and watch out for the unintended consequences: Do a pulse check with your staff every so often to see how your team is getting on with new tools. Evaluate, identify unintended consequences and assess whether the tools are bringing anticipated benefits or are adding more pressure. Enable anonymous ways of feedback for staff to express their views and concerns. Engage in continuous reflection. Identify how tech helps and supports workers but also how it distracts or disrupts work and workers.

Create a supportive and collegial environment

1. Create a collegial environment: Create a collaborative environment where staff can help each other and support each other with tools. Make sure to maintain a strong social element in your workplace, providing opportunities for the team to come together and support each other.

2. Enable human interactions: Make sure that in-person interactions with customers and co-workers remain at the centre. This helps keep the spirit of hospitality and puts community at the core, which in turn will make workers and customers more loyal and committed.

3. Celebrate good practice: Do recognise and reward workers. However, be mindful of not creating an overly competitive environment that can negatively affect the team.

Be transparent

1. Transparency is key: Be transparent about the reasons why the new system/tool is being brought in and how it will be used. In particular, be open about what performance data it collects and how that data is used or not. Give workers a chance to ask questions and reassure them about fair use of data.

2. Be transparent about using incentives: If using incentives and rewards, make sure (not just numeric data), inclusive, transparent. Not just data-driven, metrics driven. Reflect how the system introduces competition and its impact on team spirit and collaboration

3. Have a clear policy on AI use at work: This will help workers avoid issues with data privacy etc. If relevant, provide training and foster critical reflection on AI tools and its negative aspects. This will minimise hidden use of AI in the workplace.

4. Share learnings with other employers: In this way you can create a community of learning and support as well as enabling critical discussions about technological change.

About the Author:

Dr Agnieszka Rydzik (ARydzik@lincoln.ac.uk) is an Associate Professor at the University of Lincoln. Her research focuses on technological change and the future of work; tourism and hospitality workplaces; and making workplaces more inclusive and work more meaningful. Her most recent study, funded by the British Academy Mid-Career Fellowship, explores the ways in which hospitality workplaces navigate technological change and what this means for workers and employers. These guidelines are developed based on extensive data gathered through this project.

Find out more: *hospitalityfutures.co.uk/reboot*