

MOBILE

## How mobile will transform hotel front desks next year

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*Tablets and smartphones may replace traditional hotel front desks*

By [Alex Samuely](#)

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Although mobile has set up shop in thousands of hotels with the popularity of keyless room entry and personal concierge applications this year, it could soon also take over front desks with self-service check-in options for guests, according to new research from Samsung Insights.

Samsung Insights' new report posits that mobile will transform the aesthetic look and function of front desks at hotels, with 47 percent of hotels planning to leverage personal devices for check-in next year. As smartphones continue cementing their place at the top of the food chain when it comes to travel and hospitality, mobile technology is bound to change the infrastructure of the industry as well.

"It makes sense to offer mobile staff in every department, not just the front desk," said Alex Shashou, co-founder and president of hospitality operations platform **ALICE**. "If your staff is empowered to work through mobile, they can go to where they are most needed and remove a lot of inefficiencies in accessing their work while also walking to the area in which it is needed.

"This allows your employees to respond to issues and requests in a timelier manner," he said. "For example, by giving mobile tools to your front desk agents, they can service guests and walk them to their rooms at the same time.

"Whereas before, it would take two staff to perform this action, and require the guests to wait in line for one of the staff to be ready. Thus, mobile staff is able to build relationships, direct the guest and perform the transactions the guest wants all at the same time."

### Evolving with efficiency

Some travelers believe that a desk between hotel staff and guests creates a barrier from the offset, resulting in a potentially frustrating process of checking in or requesting a specific service. Samsung predicts that the recent influx of mobile technology in the travel industry will cause the front desk model to change into one with more efficient features.

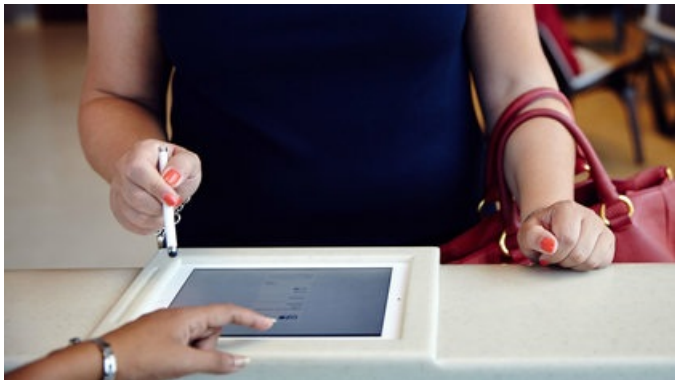
This new model will likely include smartphones or tablets that will instantly connect customers with employees while transforming the feel and look of many hotel lobbies.

A recent study from Hospitality Technology revealed that 15 percent of hotels are now leveraging tablets for check-in

purposes, with the number expected to rise to 47 percent next year. This suggests that properties currently not using mobile on-premises may soon find themselves in the minority, which could have a detrimental effect on customer satisfaction.

However, hospitality marketers will have to seriously ponder whether check-in via tablet and mobile kiosks aligns with their branding.

"I think it depends somewhat on customer expectation and brand perception," said Ryan Williams, vice president of travel at [Millward Brown Digital](#). "A highly personalized, mobile-staffed front desk experience may be better suited to 4 and 5-star hotels, where travelers expect a greater selection of options at check-in.



*Tablet check-in can offer a more streamlined experience*

"A bank of self-service kiosks may work better for business travelers just looking to check-in sans the leisure-oriented opportunities."

Guests' responses to these new technology rollouts may also differ, but they will likely strike a chord with mobile-savvy travelers seeking to get in and out of the lobby as quickly as possible. With the advent of solutions such as keyless room entry, time-strapped consumers will no longer have to wait in long lines before retiring to their rooms.

Marriott International is one of the latest companies expanding its mobile request platform as it celebrates its planned acquisition of Starwood Hotels & Resorts by piloting keyless room entry ([see story](#)).

"I suspect traveler response will vary based on trip intent and expectations," Mr. Williams said. "As noted in the Samsung Insights report, those traveling for business may expect or even desire more of a transactional experience, but that doesn't mean they shouldn't at least be greeted in person by a hotel employee.

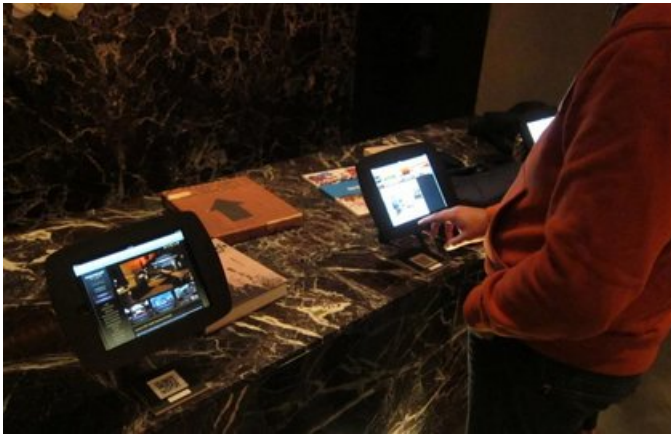
"However, I don't envision tablet check-in truly streamlining the hotel check-in process unless hotels increase the number of employees. The experience today is still one-on-one, only there's a desk between hotel employee and customer versus a tablet."

#### Self-service lobbies

Several challenges may present themselves for hotel brands seeking to implement self-service stations within lobbies. Some consumers may find the redesign to offer less personalization than being greeted face-to-face by an associate.

If high-end marketers are concerned about this being an issue, they should look to employ other options to customize guests' experiences.

For example, Samsung's research states that the Andaz Maui hotel has abolished front desks and now greets customers with check-in tablets. However, the brand took the opportunity to replace the front desk with a sandpit and welcoming furniture to bring guests into the Hawaiian spirit immediately upon walking in.



*This could become a commonplace view in many hotels next year*

Another option would be for a property to put up digital signage in the lobby that showcases interactive content for each person checking in.

Guests who prefer more transactional experiences likely will appreciate self-service kiosks with smartphones or tablets. This strategy may actually result in more sales made at each hotel, since consumers will not have to feel rushed when checking in, and can scroll through room upgrade options, spa packages and dining reservations.

"Where this new trend could really have a positive impact on guest experience, as well as ancillary revenue for hotels, is with leisure travel," Mr. Williams said. "The personalized check-in process can make travel-weary customers feel like VIPs.

"And happy customers are likely more willing to spend money. Hotels just have to be careful to avoid treating customers to a pushy sales experience."

Final Take

*Alex Samuely, staff writer on Mobile Marketer, New York*

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