Implementing a Web-Based Feedback System for Service Innovation: The Case of Innov@ccor

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Abstract

Service multinational corporations (Service MNCs) can generate new (or improved) service offerings by capitalising on knowledge from their subsidiaries (located across the world). Knowledge from those actors are integrated and exploited through a feedback mechanism that enables collective and corrective learning. The feedback mechanism allows subsidiaries to suggest, share and articulate their experiences and knowledge, with an aim at successive improvement. However, Service MNCs have encountered difficulties in integrating and articulating knowledge and information from multiple subsidiaries because of the different characteristics, preferences and localities of those subsidiaries. This paper aims to propose a framework for understanding the use of a virtual feedback system (a web-based suggestion scheme) embedded in learning that facilitates service innovation and its implementation in Service MNCs. This qualitative research employed a case study approach. The case of Innov@ccor as a web-based suggestion scheme in Accor was examined. Top management at headquarters (HQs), Regional HQs, and affiliated hotels in France, the UK, and Thailand were interviewed. The findings show that the virtual feedback system can generate service innovation. It enlarges the scope of corrective actions and collective learning among employees worldwide. Implementation of the virtual feedback system requires a conformance of standard operating procedures, employee involvement, and local adaptation.

Keywords: Service Innovation, Web-Based System, Feedback, Collective Learning, Hotel

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การดำเนินการระบบข้อมูลย้อนกลับผ่านเว็บเพื่อสร้างนวัตกรรมการบริการ กรณีศึกษาระบบข้อมูลย้อนกลับผ่านเว็บ Innov@ccor

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บทคัดย่อ

บริษัทธุรกิจบริการข้ามชาติ สามารถพัฒนาการนำเสนอบริการในรูปแบบใหม่ได้โดยใช้ประโยชน์จากความรู้ที่ได้จากบริษัทสาขาที่กระจายอยู่ทั่วโลก ความรู้จากบริษัทสาขาจะถูกรวบรวม ประมวลผล และนำไปใช้ต่อผ่านระบบข้อมูลย้อนกลับ อันก่อให้เกิดการเรียนรู้และการปฏิบัติการแก้ไขร่วมกันระบบข้อมูลย้อนกลับช่วยให้บริษัทสาขาสามารถเสนอแนะ แบ่งปัน และแลกเปลี่ยนประสบการณ์และความรู้ร่วมกัน เพื่อปรับปรุงการดำเนินงานของบริษัทสาขาและองค์กรโดยรวม อย่างไรก็ตาม บริษัทธุรกิจบริการข้ามชาติมีความยากลำบากในการรวบรวมและแลกเปลี่ยนความรู้ระหว่างบริษัทสาขา เนื่องจากบริษัทสาขาอยู่ในสถานที่แตกต่างกันทางกายภาพ ทำให้ต้องการความรู้และแนวทางการดำเนินงานแตกต่างกัน เพราะต้องตอบสนองลักษณะเฉพาะในท้องถิ่นที่บริษัทสาขาตั้งอยู่ บทความนี้จึงมีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อนำเสนอกรอบแนวคิดสำหรับการใช้ระบบข้อมูลย้อนกลับเสมือนจริงผ่านเว็บ อันก่อให้เกิดการเรียนรู้ร่วมกัน แล้วนำไปสู่นวัตกรรมบริการในบริษัทธุรกิจบริการข้ามชาติ การวิจัยเชิงคุณภาพนี้ศึกษากรณีระบบข้อมูลย้อนกลับบนเว็บ ชื่อ Innov@ccor ของกลุ่มโรงแรมข้ามชาติ Accor โดยสัมภาษณ์เชิงลึกผู้บริหารระดับสูงในบริษัทแม่ (HQs) บริษัทแม่ในภูมิภาค (Regional HQs) และโรงแรมสาขา ในประเทศฝรั่งเศส อังกฤษ และไทย ผลการศึกษาพบว่า การใช้ระบบข้อมูลย้อนกลับเสมือนจริงผ่านเว็บ Innov@ccor สามารถสร้างนวัตกรรมบริการได้ โดยระบบนี้ได้ขยายขอบเขตการเรียนรู้และการปฏิบัติการแก้ไขร่วมกันระหว่างพนักงานของ Accor ทั่วโลก บริษัทแม่ได้กำหนดมาตรฐานสำหรับวิธีปฏิบัติงาน (Standard Operating Procedures) เพื่อบังคับให้โรงแรมสาขาเข้าใช้ระบบดังกล่าวอย่างต่อเนื่องได้กระตุ้นให้พนักงานรู้สึกมีส่วนร่วมและมีความสามารถในการใช้ระบบ ตลอดจนได้อนุญาตให้โรงแรมสาขาแต่ละแห่งสามารถปรับเปลี่ยนวิธีการใช้ระบบ เพื่อให้เหมาะกับลักษณะเฉพาะและความสามารถของพนักงานในแต่ละพื้นที่ เพื่อสนับสนุนให้มีการใช้ระบบอย่างสม่ำเสมอและต่อเนื่อง

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Introduction

Service multinational corporations (Service MNCs) have faced high competition in the global marketplace (Kotabe & Helsen, 2001). Together with concentration on global and local strategies, Service MNCs require a focus on innovation in order to survive (Trott, 2002). Due to service specificities (e.g. intangibility, coterminality of production and consumption, and high people involvement) (Miles, 2001), human resources are an important source of innovations in services in service companies. Employees serving customers have direct interactions with the customers; therefore, customers' needs and preferences can be obtained from such employee experience. As time passes, employees will come up with a better way of performing their operating routines to serve customers due to knowledge accumulation (Argote, 1999). Knowledge about customers' needs and routines embedded in employees can engender new routines or new service offerings for customers. In general, service companies attempt to acquire feedback from their employees through many feedback devices (e.g. employee questionnaire survey, individual interviews, and meetings and field trips) (Tushman, Newman, & Romanelli, 2004). In particular, Service MNCs having several subsidiaries located around the world have to provide appropriate mechanisms in order to gain knowledge from employees working in these different subsidiaries. Service MNCs establish an online learning community in order to obtain feedback from employees by deploying information communication technologies (ICTs). Employee involvement is critical for sustaining a virtual feedback mechanism. Some Service MNCs have been applying and implementing such a feedback mechanism to generate new offerings and processes. Therefore, this article intends to explore the use of a web-based suggestion scheme to facilitate feedback with the aim of inducing innovations in Service MNCs.

Literature review

With the intention of studying the use of a web-based suggestion scheme to facilitate feedback for innovation, we will begin by discussing service innovation. After that, learning from feedback, which enables new variations and application of ICTs to the feedback mechanism, will be explicated.

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Service innovation

In general, innovation is a process of change, transformation and commercialisation (Flynn & Chatman, 2004; Rogers, 2003; Tidd, Bessant, & Pavitt, 2001; Weinstein & Baumol, 1999). In particular, service innovation can be explained as changing combinations of tangible/intangible product innovation and technological/managerial process innovation (Miles, 1993). The combinations vary among service firms because of their specific contexts and environments (e.g. firm size, service industries and specific country). Incremental innovations from adaptations of existing products or new ways of delivering a service are included in the innovation concept (Jon Sundbo, Johnston, Mattsson, & Millett, 2001). Service innovation is frequently organic, emergent and responsive. Innovation activities in services are rarely organised by formal R&D departments and are rarely regarded as R&D by service firms themselves. Service innovation is frequently perceived as "project development" and "ad hoc" organisation (Green, Howells, & Miles, 2001; J Sundbo, 1997). As services are diverse and heterogeneous, management practices regarding innovation in service firms are various and depend on specific factors (e.g. forms and sources of innovation, types of workers involved, market circumstances, and needs of potential users) (Green, Howells, & Miles, 2001). Management skills and qualified employees are important to service firms in organising innovation activities. Sundbo and Gallouj (1998), for example, propose that new ideas come from both management and staff in an organisation; however, management plays a decisive role in screening and selecting potential innovations.

Learning from feedback

Learning gradually changes firms' forms or routines through a feedback process. This notion is indicated in Nelson and Winter's book——that a set of organisational routines evolves due to the effect of performance feedback (Nelson & Winter, 1982). Feedback is embedded in the learning process (Dickson, Farris, & Verbeke, 2001), which constitutes reflective outcomes leading to change (Tidd, Bessant, & Pavitt, 2005). Feedback leading to change in routines comes from various sources (i.e. customers and internal organisational units). Levitt and March (1988) mention that feedback from customers contributes to improvement. In addition, employee feedback or suggestions contribute to the improvement in routines because employees understand the issues on a day-to-day basis (Tsang & Antony, 2001). On the basis of an evolutionary paradigm of variation–selection–retention (Nelson & Winter, 1982), variation and selection co-evolve, and feedback from selection to

variation generates new variations for further selection (Dosi, Marengo, & Fagiolo, 2005), thus introducing dynamic routines over time (March, 1991; Zollo & Winter, 2002). Kogut and Zander (1993) indicate that feedback or lessons learned by subsidiaries in foreign markets influences existing accumulated knowledge in the home market and throughout the network of subsidiaries. Despite wide recognition of the importance of feedback, firms see feedback as optional and some fail to implement it in their projects (Tidd, Bessant, & Pavitt, 2005).

Nevertheless, positive feedback engenders path dependency reflecting the way in which firms have travelled through time. March (1991) argues that positive feedback creates an equilibrium (stable form) of routines, which is difficult to alter in changing environments. Dickson, Farris, and Verbeke (2001) explain that the positive feedback effect from a previous change leads to further change in the same direction. The new knowledge (e.g. new technology) cannot be seen due to the constraint of knowledge accumulated within firms over time (Dickson, Farris, & Verbeke, 2001).

A feedback mechanism is considered as a post-action. The reflection from performing particular actions will be employed as new inputs for improving further actions. This offers flexible and responsive activities that can modify a process (Cusins, 1994). Matthews (1996) explains that a problem-solving process requires knowledge converted from feedbacks. Feedback from learning from trial-and-error and learning by doing will be integrated into existing knowledge and, occasionally, contribute to innovations. Learning by trial-and-error or experimenting (March, 1991) is considered to be experiential learning, which contributes to tacit knowledge (Zollo & Winter, 2002). As firms tend to learn in areas around their existing knowledge, and lessons learned are recombined into existing knowledge (Kogut & Zander, 1992), learning brings about accumulated knowledge leading to path dependency (Dickson, Farris, & Verbeke, 2001).

Moreover, organisations learn by "doing" (Levitt & March, 1988) and remember by "doing" (Nelson & Winter, 1982: 99). The repeated action of performing similar tasks over a long period of time constitutes accumulation of tacit knowledge (Zollo & Winter, 2002) and specialisation (Argote, 1999). Operating routines can be stated as an organisational memory since the repetition of actions also create a storage of tacit knowledge in doing the particular task in an automatic manner (Nelson & Winter, 1982). The accumulation of tacit knowledge, together with occasional acts of creativity, engenders incremental improvement in operating

routines in a static environment (Zollo & Winter, 2002: 341). In addition, tacit knowledge can emerge from repeated action underlined by explicit knowledge. Nonaka (2007:166) explains that when explicit knowledge such as a written manual is shared throughout an organisation, employees begin to internalise it (i.e., they use it to broaden, extend and reframe their own tacit knowledge).

Building a virtual learning platform: Integrating ICTs and a feedback mechanism

Information and communication technologies (ICTs) play an important role in leveraging knowledge across units in companies (Krogh, Nonaka, & Aben, 2004). Especially for multinational corporations (MNCs), ICTs are exploited to develop a knowledge repository for actors to access and exchange knowledge in the enterprise (Porter & Solvell, 2003). Indeed, ICTs can enlarge the scope of social interactions across geographical boundaries (Krogh, Nonaka, & Aben, 2004). An obstacle to exchanging knowledge from actors living in different time zones can be overcome. ICTs can help dispersed units in MNCs around the world so that they can participate in the virtual platform at a convenient time (Na Ubon, 2005).

In service companies, ICTs are exploited to enhance innovation, especially process innovation (Miles & Tether, 2003). ICTs are firstly used to improve the service production process, with an aim to achieve efficiency (Barras, 1986). In an era of information economy, ICTs are widely used by a particular type service firm, namely the Knowledge Intensive Business Service (KIBS), to manage a large amount of information and knowledge to create business solutions for their clients across national borders (Miles et al., 1994). ICTs are important tools for facilitating knowledge management to generate new methods of problem solving and/or new solutions for particular clients. For Service MNCs, innovations can be induced by capitalising on exchanging knowledge among variously different subsidiaries located throughout the world (Kogut & Zander, 1993). ICTs stimulate learning communities among dispersed actors (including subsidiaries and headquarters (HQs) (Palloff & Pratt, 1999). Actors can access a knowledge repository to learn from others' experiences and suggestions stored in the virtual space. These lessons from others will be integrated into existing routines, thereby creating new or improved operating routines or service offerings. In addition, actors can access the virtual platform to provide suggestions or share their experiences. Information fed back from actors is stored in the virtual knowledge repository. Obviously, ICTs not only

help to exchange knowledge, but they also accelerate knowledge and innovation diffusion within the multinational enterprise (Sutthijakra, 2008). A transfer process of new business practices, operating routines and service offerings among actors from different areas around the world can be eased by the adoption of ICTs.

However, Service MNCs may encounter difficulties in implementing the virtual platform due to diversities in languages and cultures. Despite the fact that English tends to be used as a common medium for communicating among dispersed subsidiaries, a lack of written English skills obstructs many people from exchanging ideas and experiences through the virtual knowledge platform (Palloff & Pratt, 2003). Moreover, actors coming from different cultural backgrounds may have difficulties in communication and interpretation (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002). Therefore, a common mechanism to acquire the involvement of dissimilar actors may be difficult to achieve.

Method and Case Selection

This research employed a qualitative approach in order to understand the use of a web-based suggestion scheme to facilitate feedback, with the aim of inducing innovations in Service MNCs. The actions and interactions among actors, and the mechanisms underneath the complex phenomenon of a virtual feedback mechanism for innovation were explored through a case study approach and in-depth interview method, as suggested by Yin (2003), Gauri (1995) and Miles (2001).

Accor, a French multinational hotel group, was selected as it was ranked in the top 5 largest international hotels (based on a number of hotel rooms) in the world in 2004 by an annual ranking of the world's 300 largest hotel groups as of 31 December of that year. Moreover, Accor can be considered as an innovation-oriented company, according to an interpretation of Accor strategy stated in a company annual report in 2005. In addition, two different hotel chains (i.e. Sofitel and Novotel) within Accor were also examined to include two product lines. Sofitel is classified as an up-scale hotel; and Novotel is a mid-scale hotel serving business and travelling customers. Four affiliated hotels in different countries (Sofitel in London and Novotel in Manchester in the UK, and Sofitel and Novotel in Bangkok, Thailand) were investigated to reflect the perspective of affiliated hotels. In-depth interviews with top management at their headquarters in Paris, at the regional headquarters in Bangkok, and at

the affiliated hotels in London, Manchester and Bangkok were conducted from December 2005 to April 2007. As a complementary method, the annual reports of Accor from 2005 and 2006 were examined. Data were analysed and sent back to the interviewees for data validation.

Implementation of Innov@ccor for new ideas

Innov@ccor is an attempt on the part of Accor to provide a virtual space to facilitate the innovation process in its enterprise. New ideas and suggestions from employees around the world can be sent back to be stored on Innov@ccor. New ideas posted on Innov@ccor are reviewed and justified by management online as to whether the new ideas are useful for the hotel. The selected new idea is then rewarded by Accor, and implemented in the local hotel where the new idea was generated. The successfully implemented idea might become a new best practice of that local hotel or enterprise. This section elaborates the use of Innov@ccor as a virtual feedback platform, including the development, process, and implementation of Innov@ccor.

Development of Innov@ccor

Innov@ccor is a web-based suggestion scheme that can accessible via the Accor intranet. It was developed and launched in 2001 by the Human Resources Department in Accor headquarters in Paris with the aim of involving employees in innovative projects and understanding which elements in Accor can be innovative and how Accor can be innovative. The online suggestion scheme provides a virtual space for all Accor employees around the world to share ideas and suggestions for improving operations and/or customer services.

A process of using Innov@ccor

Basically, new ideas can be proposed by staff at affiliated hotels around the world via Innov@ccor. In particular, the process of operating Innov@ccor is explained in four steps.

Step 1: Employees post ideas on Innov@ccor.

Step 2: The General Manager of each property validates the posted ideas by his/her employees.

Step 3: If the ideas are accepted, the General Manager deals with the implementation of the idea and rewards its author.

Step 4: The ideas can be suggested as best practices by the General Manager, if the ideas bring about benefits or advantages to more than one hotel.

The reward given by Innov@ccor is based on local evaluation. The General Manager of the local hotel plays a decisive role in justifying and giving the reward for the best idea. Interestingly, there is a possibility that a successfully implemented idea at the affiliated hotel can become a standard operating procedure of Accor, but it has to be verified by the Corporate headquarters. The Reception Manager at the Novotel hotel in Manchester indicated the following:

The rewarded idea in one Novotel hotel can become the new best practice for Novotel hotels across the UK. If the General Manager thinks that the rewarded idea is very useful for hotels, he will submit it to the Area Manager in UK for further consideration. With an approval from the Area Manger, that rewarded idea will be distributed to all Novotel hotels in UK as the best practice in UK.

Implementation of Innov@ccor

Innov@ccor has been put into use worldwide through three mechanisms, including stating it as a standard operating procedure, establishing a challenge or competition to win a reward, and allowing local adaptation.

First, in particular, Innov@ccor is defined as an Accor standard operating procedure, which requires conformance from affiliated hotels around the world. Therefore, affiliated hotels in Accor have to motivate and encourage their staff to be able to understand and utilise Innov@ccor. Some examples of educating the staff include displaying posters about Innov@ccor in staff canteens and offices, providing an Accor corner equipped with computers for the staff to obtain access to Innov@ccor, and arranging Innov@ccor training sessions. In addition, the Regional Head Office Asia provides support for affiliated hotels and their staff in terms of training them in how to use Innov@ccor.

Second, the affiliated hotel and/or headquarters can set a challenge to encourage staff on the properties to use Innov@ccor. There is a creative person in each area around the world responsible for setting challenges and competitions to encourage employees to

become involve in Innov@ccor. For example, the Regional Head Office UK or Paris set a challenge to motivate staff to come up with new ideas and to post those ideas on Innov@ccor; the winner will receive from 200 to 250 pounds as an example. Also, in 2005, more than 2,000 ideas were applied and their originators rewarded worldwide.

Finally, Accor headquarters assists with local staff involvement by allowing the local adaptation of Innov@ccor at affiliated hotels. The Corporate Head Office and the Regional Head Office Asia have worked closely to come up with this solution for Accor hotels in Bangkok so that they can use Innov@ccor effectively and efficiently. For example, there are slight differences in the process of Innov@ccor in Paris and Bangkok. As French and English are used to communicate on Innov@ccor, employees in Paris can access and use Innov@ccor directly. However, in Bangkok, some local staff have difficulty in writing English. Therefore, the hotel provides a printed form in Thai for employees to write down new ideas. After that, a person, called an innovactor or innovactress, will translate the new ideas into English and put them on Innov@ccor.

An innovactor or innovactress is established as a facilitator in the affiliated hotels in Thailand to help local employees use Innov@ccor. Not only does an innovactor reduce the language barrier, s/he helps the General Manager of the local hotels to verify new ideas posted by their employees. The hotels in Bangkok have more employees than those in Europe so the General Manager cannot validate all of the ideas in the limited time available, resulting in setting one manager or supervisor (i.e. a person in the human resources department or the general manager's personal assistant) to be the innovactor or innovactress. The innovactor or innovactress should have knowledge of and skills related to the operation, should be able to read and write English, have IT literacy, and be creative so that s/he can validate ideas properly and offer appropriate reasons when rejecting or accepting a particular idea.

Feedback via a global web-based suggestion scheme: A synthesis of empirical data and theoretical issues

The case discussed in the present study demonstrates that the multinational hotel group exploits a web–based suggestion scheme to facilitate feedback for generating service innovation. As mentioned in the previous section, Innov@ccor represents the intention of

Accor headquarters to stimulate new ideas suggesting new or improved operating routines and customer services. Due to the implementation of ICTs, the multinational hotel group can encourage involvement of employees and management located in different locations. This section demonstrates key lessons learned from a synthesis of the empirical data and theoretical issues.

A virtual feedback system that generates service innovation

The virtual feedback system allows the multinational hotel group to collect information and suggestions from employees working in different locations around the world. Suggestions driving improvements are identified as new (or improved) best practices. As a consequence, changes in operating routines can occur over time because new variations from the suggestions might be integrated into the existing operating routines. The new (or improved) best practices alter operating routines in the hotel, thereby leading to a transformation of routines over time. The new (or improved) working processes are commercialised when they are implemented to serve customers in the hotel. This means that the virtual feedback system can generate innovation, according to the innovation concept explained by Rogers (2003), Weinstein & Baumol (1999), Tidd, Bessant, & Pavitt (2001) and Flynn & Chatman (2004). For example, in the Red Roof Inn in the United States in 2005, 45 out of the 480 suggestions were validated as best practices and introduced in 246 of the network's hotels. In particular, in Novotel in Manchester in the UK, an improved process of a currency exchange service at the reception desk was a result of an idea suggested by staff in the Novotel hotel through Innov@ccor. Once the process was put into practice, the reception staff spent less time serving each customer.

Feedback as a corrective action

Corrective action is driven by performance feedback in order to resolve unanticipated problems in existing routines. A reflective outcome is used to suggest new or improved operating routines. For example, in the Novotel hotel in Manchester, customers that needed to exchange currency sometimes did not bring their passports with them, and they had to go back to their rooms for their passports. During peak times of travelling, there was a long queue of customers at the reception desk so customers needed to wait for a long while to exchange their currency. The Reception Manager, then, posted the idea on Innov@ccor that

the hotel should notice the guests that they needed to bring their passports with them when exchanging currency at the front desk, and this then became a best practice in the Novotel Manchester Centre. This finding is consistent with Callon (2002), in that feedback is used to achieve successive adjustments.

Moreover, the use of a web–based suggestion scheme can engender knowledge articulation among actors from different locations around the world to perform corrective actions. Through Innov@ccor, the attempt to employ corrective actions is pervasive. Several actors from distant places can create, share and justify new ideas or best practices. Corrective actions occur at two levels in the multinational hotel group. Regarding the adoption or adaptation of new ideas posted on Innov@ccor, the posted ideas or best practices can be replicated by affiliated hotels, aiming at improving their operating routines or creating new services. At the level of idea justification, corrective actions occur when the posted ideas are evaluated by the general manager of that particular hotel. The useful idea for that particular hotel was rewarded, and the rewarded idea was amended for further implementation in that particular hotel. There is a possibility that the Regional headquarters and Accor headquarters will designate the rewarded idea as a new best practice for Accor after successful results of implementation.

Linking variation and selection with feedback: A dynamic process

A feedback mechanism constitutes a dynamic process of innovation in the multinational hotel group. It acts as a mechanism transferring outcomes from the stage of selection to become inputs for new variations. The findings present the idea that an online feedback platform extensively facilitates variations of new ideas. During the stage of selection, articulation and justification of knowledge among actors occur via a web–based suggestion scheme. Various ideas and suggestions from different subsidiaries, the Regional headquarters, and Accor headquarters are exchanged and articulated so that an appropriate idea for the enterprise can be chosen. A dynamic innovation process occurs when several reflective outcomes from the selection are used to generate new varieties to re–start the innovation process. The case confirms that information, knowledge and perspectives from the articulation are utilised as new inputs to create new variations, thereby leading to evolving routines over time (Dosi, Marengo, & Fagiolo, 2005).

A web-based platform for collective learning

Through a global web-based channel, several actors (i.e. management and employees) in Accor hotels around the world learn together to generate new operating processes or best practices. They attempt to propose their new ideas or suggestions, share experiences, acquire others' knowledge, and verify new ideas or suggestions stored in a web-based suggestion scheme. The findings confirm that the virtual feedback platform can enable knowledge learning across borders (Krogh, Nonaka, & Aben, 2004; Porter & Solvell, 2003). Employees in Accor around the world can send ideas to Innov@ccor. The General Manager receives an e-mail from Innov@ccor when the staff in his/her property posts an idea on the system. Then, he or she considers the idea for which the idea originator will receive points, later converted to money from Accor if the idea benefits the property and Accor. The rewarded idea is stored in Innov@ccor to be accessible by other people.

Despite different time zones and long distances among actors, the global web-based channel facilitates collective learning among those actors throughout a process of innovation. New ideas or best practices posted on the web-based suggestion scheme can be accessible by everyone at Accor at any time. As mentioned by the Reception Manager at Novotel in Manchester:

> All staff in the hotel have a log in name and password; therefore, they can send ideas from home or elsewhere, and keep watching the ideas or topics in their interests as the system will send an e-mail to them when the new ideas in their interests are put into Innov@ccor.

As seen, the multinational hotel group in the present study establishes collective learning among different subsidiaries and headquarters, and among employees and management to induce innovation. The use of ICTs assists this multinational hotel group to manage knowledge despite different time zones and places, as mentioned by Krogh, Nonaka, & Aben (2004) and Na Ubon (2005).

Staff involvement and local modification: Key elements for implementation

A web-based suggestion scheme needs to be dynamic and active over time in order to consistently stimulate initiatives and advice from actors. Not only is IT capability necessary for the multinational hotel group, staff involvement plays an important role in activating a virtual feedback platform. The multinational hotel group employs a sense of control and motivation to acquire staff involvement worldwide. First, Accor has declared that the implementation of Innov@ccor is a standard operating procedure to which all affiliated hotels need to conform. Therefore, the affiliated hotels unavoidably adopt Innov@ccor to their organisations. Second, Accor motivates staff to post their ideas and suggestions on Innov@ccor based on reward and recognition. In addition, in order to motivate employees to use Innov@ccor, Accor makes this programme active by communicating and educating people about it, as well as setting challenges to stimulate employees to post new ideas.

The multinational hotel group allows a certain degree of local adaptation in the process of Innov@ccor. Due to the locally idiosyncratic characteristics of different subsidiaries, the affiliated hotels can modify the process of using a web-based scheme to fit their particular needs. These affiliated hotels can amend the process of using Innov@ccor to enable local staff that are not proficient in English, for example, to be able to share and access new ideas. In addition, culture is taken into account in implementing the virtual feedback mechanism. One of the unique personality characteristics of Thai people is to be reserved in manner; therefore, some Thai staff need assistance and encouragement from an innovactor or innovactress in order to codify their new ideas before putting them on Innov@ccor. Although different languages and cultures bring about some difficulties in implementing an online knowledge platform (Palloff & Pratt, 2003; Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002), the multinational hotel group has been able to make an adjustment in the process of using the virtual knowledge platform to continually activate the learning system over time.

Conclusion

This study presents the use of a global web-based suggestion scheme in generating new (or improved) best practices in the Accor group. This multinational hotel group learns from feedback to stimulate new ideas and to avoid repeating mistakes. The reflective outcome from the feedback mechanism can be used to generate new variations. The employees' suggestions that can then improve operating processes in the hotel are indicated as new (or improved) best practices for the hotel group. The new (or improved) best practices are communicated throughout the international hotel chain. Furthermore, the effects from feedback can be multiplied when the multinational hotel group embraces ICTs to create a global web-based suggestion scheme for collective learning and corrective action among actors around the globe. In other words, the use of a web-based suggestion scheme encourages knowledge sharing and learning in the multinational hotel group with the aim to induce innovation. Also, the limitations of different time zones and long distance inhibiting worldwide collective learning and corrective action can be removed to a certain degree. Importantly, in order to activate sustainably a global web-based suggestion scheme, staff involvement and local adaptation of the web-based tool are necessary. The multinational hotel group encourages staff involvement in using this web-based tool through challenges, contests, financial rewards, and recognition. In addition, in the case that the web-based system does not fit the local affiliated hotels' needs or specificities, the multinational hotel group and those particular affiliated hotels will introduce some modifications to the web-based tool and related procedures. This paper does not offer general explanations for other settings, but it provides an in-depth analysis of the use of a global web-based suggestion scheme to generate new (or improved) best practices at Accor. However, applicability of the findings to other settings may yield theoretical generalisation.

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