



Housekeeping

by Matt Palmer

Several tips for controlling housekeeping labor costs

*Another great article from The Rooms Chronicle®, the #1 journal for hotel rooms management! ***Important notice: This article may not be reproduced without permission of the publisher or the author.*** College of Hospitality and Tourism Management, Niagara University, P.O. Box 2036, Niagara University, NY 14109-2036. Phone: 866-Read TRC. E-mail: editor@roomschronicle.com*

Notice: The ideas, opinions, recommendations, and interpretations presented herein are those of the author(s). The College of Hospitality and Tourism Management, Niagara University/The Rooms Chronicle® assume no responsibility for the validity of claims in items reported.

In many hotels, Housekeeping is not only the largest department in terms of number of employees, it is also the department responsible for continuously maintaining the largest amount of physical space in the hotel. Even more significantly, it is often the one department that is responsible for incurring the greatest amount of expenses on laundry, linens, amenity items, and of course, payroll and benefits for its employees.

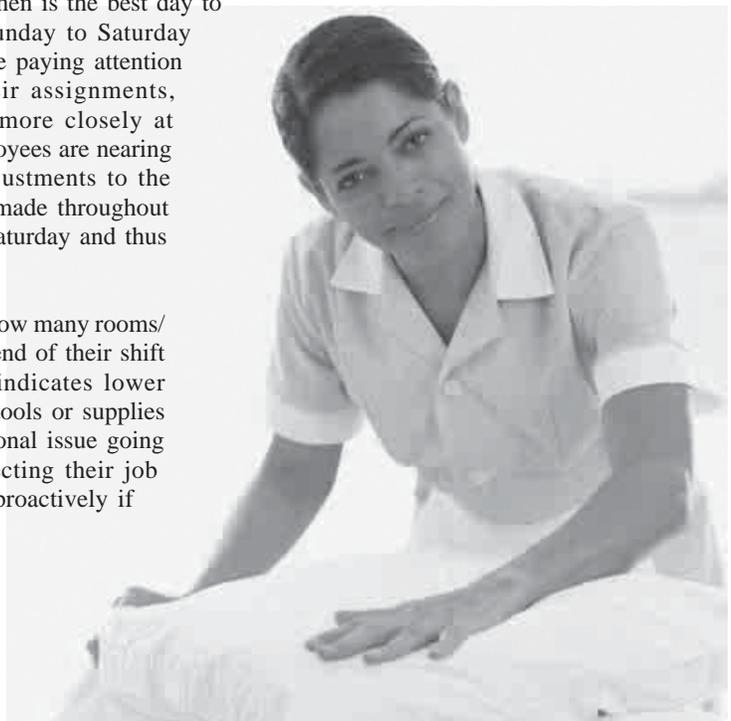
With Housekeeping being the department that only takes away from the bottom line but never generates any revenue to add to it, every housekeeping manager should always make controlling their department's expenses a top priority; and that should start with labor costs. This sounds simple, and if the hotel's housekeeping team is really dedicated to this goal it can be; but controlling labor expenses when the hotel is busy and there are a thousand other things to do, that is the real challenge. Here are some ideas that can be used as a checklist to keep the Housekeeping department's labor costs under control.

Monitor overtime

Overtime is a drain on the Housekeeping budget. Remember that it drains the payroll line of your budget 50% quicker for any hours that an employee works in excess of 40 hours per week. In other words, it is like paying a 50% interest rate on money borrowed from the bank or credit card company! Employees must be educated that they are not permitted to work more than 40 hours per work week unless authorized by a housekeeping manager. Authorizing overtime should only be a temporary stop gap measure because any other alternatives are too costly or not readily achievable in the short term. To ensure that employees do not accrue unauthorized overtime hours, managers must vigorously monitor the employees' schedules and time cards or time clock punches each day.

Depending on the hotel's standard work week, plan out when is the best day to start monitoring overtime. Many hotels operate on a Sunday to Saturday schedule. And while the supervisor of each shift should be paying attention to when associates are clocking out or finishing their assignments, Wednesday is probably a good day to begin looking more closely at schedules and time clock punches to determine which employees are nearing the threshold of overtime. By doing this, necessary adjustments to the overall schedule and room attendant assignments can be made throughout the week, rather than having to cut employees on Saturday and thus negatively affecting business and quality.

Not only should overtime be monitored, but monitor how many rooms/credits each room attendant is bringing back at the end of their shift as incomplete. Is there a pattern emerging that indicates lower productivity? Maybe an associate doesn't have the tools or supplies they need to do their job? Or there could be a personal issue going on with the associate outside of work that is affecting their job performance. All of these issues can be addressed proactively if overtime is monitored regularly.



Perform a payroll analysis

A supervisor or office coordinator should be completing a weekly payroll analysis of: number of rooms cleaned daily, VIP arrivals/stayovers, check-outs, deep-cleaning schedules, and other items that can affect labor costs. Once a month, the housekeeping manager should conduct a full payroll analysis that determines the total monthly labor costs and looks for ways to decrease various labor costs. This is an important practice to ensure that unnecessary labor is not being used when business does not demand it.



Utilize staff to its fullest potential

What is the housekeeping team doing when they are not busy? Create lists and checklists of areas that can be deep-cleaned or special projects for when public areas are not busy or house attendants have extra time. Meet with the team to find where they think the department can improve the cleanliness and image of the hotel. Associates are much more willing to complete extra tasks that they believe in and can take pride in. A housekeeping manager at a unionized property in Washington, D.C. found that this practice improved the productivity of his team and helped them to take more pride in their work. It also improved his relationship with his subordinates.

Cross-train for flexibility and adaptiveness

Many associates would like to learn additional skills to help develop their career in the hotel or within the company. By cross-training housekeeping employees in positions other than their own, the wise manager can deploy these associates where they might be needed most immediately when certain areas of the department are busier than others. This can help prevent overtime from accruing because of a lack of trained employees in a specific position. The same goes for managers. If utilizing the Front Desk evening manager as an MOD for the second shift is an option, this can avoid having to schedule a PM housekeeping supervisor.

How much does the schedule cost?

Create a schedule that actually calculates labor costs; Microsoft Excel is a perfect tool for this. This will make the actual cost of the schedule more visible to the manager. Often times when the weekly schedule is produced the manager making the schedule does not realize how much capital is actually being allocated to run the department on a weekly basis. Find a schedule layout that fits the hotel it is being used for, something that calculates how many room attendants are needed to clean the required rooms for that specific day. Also remember to look at the events occurring in the hotel and the weather prediction that could affect public area cleaning and guest request runners. Frequently, those positions are scheduled purely on occupancy alone, which is not always an accurate predictor of labor demand.

It's a TEAM effort

Empower supervisors and office coordinators to look at the schedule and projected hotel occupancy to see if the department is over or understaffed for the next day. Creating awareness throughout the department will make controlling labor costs more of a team effort rather than it always coming from the top. If your hotel is a unionized property it may not be possible to schedule associates "off" the next day; however, it will at least make the managers aware of the overstaffing and encourage them to spend more time on the schedule the following week if this issue starts to become a trend.

Low occupancy provides opportunities

If the hotel is at low occupancy and the room attendants are paid travel credits for cleaning rooms on more than one floor, consolidate the hotel as much as possible to keep them on one floor. This practice will keep the room attendants happy, lower

utility costs, and assist in better controlling labor costs. Another practice is to “hang rooms” when occupancy is low to lessen the number of room attendants required to clean the hotel. Make sure those rooms are stripped so unwanted odors do not build up. This is a project that can be assigned to house attendants that do not have as much work to do or who are assigned to assist a fewer number of room attendants.

Outside Labor: Do the pros outweigh the cons?

Utilizing “outside” labor can be very financially beneficial to a housekeeping department if it is possible to negotiate a favorable contract. When doing this, two of the most important topics are: 1) attaining a supervisor for the temporary labor and 2) the cost of training the outside laborers and whether or not the hotel will have to pay for it. Outside labor unfortunately has high turnover rates; however, the hotel can avoid this from affecting them if Management is able to negotiate with the outside company to pay for training. That agreement can save the hotel thousands of dollars a year. Depending on the department’s policy of who can declare a room clean and vacant and ready for occupancy, a supervisor for the temporary labor can be a tremendous help. At a number of larger properties in Florida, the outside labor companies provide supervisors to inspect and “punch” the rooms clean, which is a big assistance especially where hotels’ have had to cut down on supervisor positions due to labor cuts. Outside labor can be a great cost saver, especially when comparing the cost of paying competitive wages and benefits in today’s industry.

Conclusion

As mentioned in the beginning, none of these recommendations are groundbreaking ideas. It is all about finding what works for the selected property and finding the discipline to follow up on these ideas on a weekly or daily basis. Whether the hotel is a union or non-union, small or large, luxury or select service property, housekeeping labor is expensive but very crucial. So it is very important to monitor it and keep it as cost-effective as possible. ✧



(Matt Palmer is the Assistant Executive Housekeeper at the Hyatt Regency Jacksonville Riverfront, which has 963 newly-renovated guestrooms and 110,000 square feet of meeting and event space. He had been previously employed at the Crowne Plaza hotel in Niagara Falls, NY and the Pompano Beach Club Resort in Southampton, Bermuda. E-mail: matt.palmer@hyatt.com.)