



Ask Gail

by William D. Frye, Ph.D., CHE

Should lone employees leave the front desk?

*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*

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Dear Gail,

I work as the night auditor at a brand-affiliated select-service hotel. Except when we are anticipating to be sold out for the evening, I am usually the only employee working in the hotel during the night. Sometimes guests call the front desk and request extra towels, they want a rollaway bed or crib delivered, or ask me to bring them a plunger because of a backed up toilet. This requires me to leave the front desk unstaffed for up to several minutes at a time. The hotel's general manager has instructed me to not leave the front desk for any reason and to ask guests to come to the front desk to retrieve any items that they request. Is this appropriate?

Jason G.
Daphne, AL

Dear Jason,

No, it is not an appropriate response to a guest request that he or she must come to the front desk to retrieve the item. But such policy has become necessary at your hotel because you are scheduled to work alone. This is the real problem and something that should never happen.

Your manager is correct that the front desk should never be left unattended. The phone may ring, a guest may seek assistance, the fire panel may activate, or a myriad of other situations could occur that would require an employee's prompt response at the desk or in the lobby. If your hotel has a gift shop/pantry at the desk that is open 24 hours a day, its inventory would be left unsecured if you were to leave the immediate area. Other items at the front desk such as the cash drawer, registration card bucket, key machine, hotel reports, guest information, electronic equipment, or even the lobby furniture and fixtures could be stolen if left unattended.

For employee safety and matters of personal comfort, no employee should ever be scheduled to work alone at a hotel. Without having a second employee to at least temporarily relieve you at the desk, you are forced to make tough decisions when guests request that an amenity be delivered or you need to take a bathroom or meal break. Every state mandates that employees who work more than a six hour shift must be afforded a rest break.

In my stays at various hotels I continue to be shocked at the number of auditors who are tasked to both work alone and also find a way to deliver departure folios to guestrooms during the overnight shift, something that can take up to 20 minutes or more to complete. How is this safe for the hotel, its lone employee or its guests? It's not safe and a practice that places greater importance over minimizing labor expense than safety, security or service excellence.

While there may not be sufficient work to justify two employees working at the front desk on an overnight shift, assuredly the hotel can find tasks for a second employee to complete. Many limited- and select-service hotels will staff a security officer or shuttle van driver for the overnight shift or a maintenance or housekeeping employee to perform utility tasks such as lobby cleaning, folding laundry, pool maintenance, and kitchen cleaning. Consider having a utility or maintenance person work from 8pm until 4am, long enough to get the checkout folios delivered, and then perhaps have them relieved by a breakfast buffet or kitchen utility worker who arrives at 4am or 5am. But it is clearly sending the wrong message when Management expects an employee to work alone on the overnight shift, insists that hotel guests must come to the

lobby to retrieve requested items, prohibits employees from leaving the front desk to take a break, or expects its employees to leave the desk or lobby unattended in order to perform other tasks. ✧

(If you have a specific question related to a hotel matter, please email your inquiry for Ask Gail to: editor@roomschronicle.com. We endeavor to answer all questions pertaining to operational matters and management practices but cannot respond to specific inquiries related to a hotel's financial performance, litigation matters, or complaints received from guests.)