

1-1-1988

## From Clerk and Cashier to Guest Service Agent

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### Recommended Citation

Allin, Nancy J. and Halpine, Kelly (1988) "From Clerk and Cashier to Guest Service Agent," *Hospitality Review*: Vol. 6 : Iss. 1 , Article 5.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/hospitalityreview/vol6/iss1/5>

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# From Clerk and Cashier to Guest Service Agent

## **Abstract**

In their study - From Clerk and Cashier to Guest Service Agent - by Nancy J. Allin, Director of Quality Assurance and Training and Kelly Halpine, Assistant Director of Quality Assurance and Training, The Waldorf-Astoria, New York, the authors state at the outset: "The Waldorf-Astoria has taken the positions of registration clerk and cashier and combined them to provide excellent guest service and efficient systems operation. The authors tell how and why the combination works.

That thesis statement defines the article, and puts it squarely in the crosshairs of the service category. Allin and Halpine use their positions at the Waldorf-Astoria in New York City to frame their observations

"The allocation of staff hours has been a challenge to many front office managers who try their hardest to schedule for the norm but provide excellent, efficient service throughout the peaks," Allin and Halpine allude. "...the decision [to combine the positions of registration clerk and cashier] was driven by a desire to improve guest service where its impact is most obvious, at the front desk. Cross-trained employees speed the check-in and check-out process by performing both functions, as the traffic at the desk dictates," the authors say.

Making such a move has resulted in positive benefits for both the guests and the hotel. "Benefits to the hotel, in addition to those brought to bear by increased guest satisfaction, include greater flexibility in weekly scheduling and in granting vacations while maintaining adequate staffing at the desk," say Allin and Halpine. "Another expected outcome, net payroll savings, should also be realized as a consequence of the ability to schedule more efficiently."

The authors point to communication as the key to designing a successful combination such as this, with the least amount of service disruption. They bullet-point what that communication should entail. Issues of seniority, wage and salary rates, organizational charting, filing, scheduling, possible probationary periods, position titles, and physical layouts are all discussed.

"It is critical that each of the management issues be addressed and resolved before any training is begun," Allin and Halpine suggest. "Unresolved issues project confusion and lack of conviction to line employees and the result is frustration and a lack of commitment to the combination process," they push the thought

Allin and Halpine insist: "Once begun, training must be ongoing and consistent." In the practical sense, the authors provide that authorizing overtime is helpful in accomplishing training.

"Training must address the fact that employees will be faced with guest situations which are new to them, for example: an employee previously functioning as a cashier will be faced with walking guests. Specific exercises should be included to address these needs," say the authors.

## **Keywords**

Nancy J. Allin, Kelly Halpine, From Clerk and Cashier to Guest Service Agent, Systems, Operations, Communication

# From Clerk and Cashier To Guest Service Agent

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*The Waldorf-Astoria has taken the positions of registration clerk and cashier and combined them to provide excellent guest service and efficient systems operation. The authors tell how and why the combination works.*

Everyone has experienced it as a guest at one hotel or another—there are several people in front of you in line to be checked out by a clerk who is working as fast as is humanly possible. The individual's annoyance is escalated by the awareness that there are three smiling but idle registration clerks at the other end of the desk, eagerly awaiting their first arrival. The allocation of staff hours has been a challenge to many front office managers who try their hardest to schedule for the norm but provide excellent, efficient service throughout the peaks.

While there can be many reasons to combine the positions of registration clerk and cashier, and many aspects were considered at the Waldorf-Astoria, the decision was driven by a desire to improve guest service where its impact is most obvious—at the front desk. Cross-trained employees speed the check-in and check-out process by performing both functions, as the traffic at the desk dictates. Registration clerks can cash checks and cashiers can issue duplicate room keys, in many cases eliminating the necessity of having the guest wait in two lines.

Benefits to the hotel, in addition to those brought to bear by increased guest satisfaction, include greater flexibility in weekly scheduling and in granting vacations while maintaining adequate staffing at the desk. Another expected outcome, net payroll savings, should also be realized as a consequence of the ability to schedule more efficiently.

Many of the challenges presented by any restructuring of the work process in a hotel are due to the fact that "production" cannot be stopped. We do not have the luxury afforded the manufacturing business of "stopping the line" while we retrain, practice our skills, and then emerge with our flags flying. We must continue to provide excellent service to our guests while assuring that they cannot even sense that a change is occurring.

The following information outlines suggestions gleaned from the

experience of managers involved in the combination of the room clerk and cashier positions at the Waldorf-Astoria. Each suggestion should be evaluated in the context of your hotel's structure and climate. This has been prepared in the hope that our experience can assist your hotel in assuring that the transition is a smooth one, thereby assuring that excellent guest service and efficient systems operation are maintained. These guidelines will be presented in two parts: managing the combination and accomplishing the training.

The entire process can be accomplished with the least disruption to service if at least as much time is committed to managing the combination as to the actual training. A wrong climate for communication and the lack of administration to many details can disrupt a successful combination faster than any other factor.

### **Managing the Combination**

In order to accomplish a successful combination and ensure efficient front office operations throughout the process, it is essential that the management staff be completely committed to the project. Employees must receive a consistently positive view of the combination from their supervisors and the entire management staff. The single most significant factor in the success is the degree of communication taking place within the department.

- Gain commitment from current departmental managers. Objectives and target dates should be determined with the input and support of the director of front office operations and the comptroller.
- Schedule frequent meetings between the managers responsible for the combination in order to continually update the progress. These meetings should include the managers who actually supervise the desk and can observe the progress of each employee.
- Physically combine the two functions including office locations, telephone lines, etc. before the skill training begins. Every effort must be seized to make these two groups of people think of themselves as one.
- Establish a new organizational chart and ensure that all management position descriptions reference the supervision of the cashiering function.
- Select a title for newly-created positions and prepare appropriate position descriptions.
- Develop staffing guides for all levels of occupancy to address hiring and scheduling issues.
- Address the issue of seniority and how to combine the two departmental seniority listings. Determine the scheduling procedure for all positions, taking into consideration how each department currently handles these issues.
- Review wage rates and salary for each position in view of chang-

ed (increased or decreased) responsibilities.

- Combine departmental personnel files in one location.
- Decide how to allocate payroll expenditures for the new job category between the rooms and G&A departments.
- Establish a detailed schedule for the cross-training including a target date, time frame for classroom instruction, and dates for each of the management tasks required.
- Process wage and position change paperwork effective the date of the combination. Educate management throughout the hotel so that all understand the new reporting relationships and changes in procedure.
- The fact that the combination is undertaken so that the hotel is better able to service the guest, must be communicated effectively to all involved. There should be constant reminders of our ultimate objective-service.
- In most situations, the combination is not aimed at staff reduction and this fact must be communicated. Employees who are worrying about the security of their jobs do not, and cannot, keep training or the guest service perspective foremost in their minds.
- Specify requirements for bonding and in-house accounting procedures for issuing banks to assure that there will not be a delay in the portion of training which involves cash procedures.
- Identify administrative and equipment requirements such as endorsement stamps, lock boxes, access codes, cash drawers, staplers, time stamps, etc. Order supplies and services early in the process to assure availability at the time of implementation.
- Determine whether there will be a probationary period for the new position(s) and establish a system of performance evaluation. The cross-training period is a stressful one for your employees and they deserve to know where they stand relative to their own progress in acquiring new skills. Decide when salary reviews will take place and whether increases will be based on performance.

### **Address Issues Early**

It is critical that each of the management issues be addressed and resolved before any training is begun. Unresolved issues project confusion and lack of conviction to line employees and the result is frustration and a lack of commitment to the combination process.

When addressing the issue of position descriptions and combining the management of the two functions, it is essential that the creation of the model should address each position and not the person holding the position. A model based on current personalities and the talents or skills of particular people does a great disservice to the organization and could cause significant problems at a later time.

Many of these issues must be addressed as a matter of planning for

the training process. As the old adage says: "Plan the work, and work the plan." The steps outlined in the preceding section help anticipate even the small issues that can hinder training; the following points will help to facilitate the training itself.

- Once begun, training must be ongoing and consistent.
- Employees involved in the cross-training should not be simultaneously involved in any other training. The Waldorf-Astoria undertook a large guest service training effort when the employees were learning new skills, and the time and extra attention required for it was draining of their energies.
- Wherever possible, skill training should be presented by supervisory staff within the department. An absolute minimum of managers, supervisors, and the chief clerk(s) must be completely trained before the line employees, as reinforcement and coaching must be available throughout the training process.
- A master schedule should be established and agreed upon by all managers involved. Training should be scheduled into the employees' weekly work schedule and not relegated to "when it's slow at the desk."
- A needs analysis will be required to determine the actual skill training and to monitor training while it is in progress. Define the skills which must be taught and create a schedule to accomplish your objectives. In short, "plan the work and work the plan."
- A log should be kept by each trainer and each trainee of sessions scheduled and completed, as well as a check off of each essential task as it is mastered.
- Periodic audits should be scheduled between management and the trainers to assure that schedules are being met and that no obstacles to training are being encountered.
- The merging of two schedules must be explained in detail, and a new list published and posted from the outset.
- Consider additions to staff prior to starting the training. Unless the combination is being undertaken at a time of the year during which occupancy would normally indicate a scale down of staff, additional personnel may be added. This intervention may assist in providing adequate guest service throughout the training period and to compensate for attrition which may be attributed to the new skill requirements.
- Authorize overtime to accomplish the training where required.
- The training schedule should be treated with the same consideration as a work schedule with respect to assuring that training sessions take place as scheduled.
- Training must address the fact that employees will be faced with guest situations which are new to them, for example: an employee

previously functioning as a cashier will be faced with "walking" guests. Specific exercises should be included to address these needs.

- Educate lobby personnel including assistant managers and bell captains, as well as other employees such as PBX operators so that they each understand the new process and can advise guests accordingly.
- As classroom training is implemented, employees must be scheduled for practice, either working with a skilled employee or by opening more stations than would ordinarily be required. An understanding that productivity will be low must be communicated as the expertise required to handle the new function efficiently takes time and practice to develop.
- In a facility with a long desk area or many stations, open windows from the center out, again to increase the cohesiveness of the work group.
- As soon as an employee is proficient in the new skill, he or she must be scheduled to perform it as often as the old one, assuring that all employees perform all functions every week.
- A certain reluctance to postpone the implementation of the cross-training is warranted. While a careful evaluation of readiness is required, the task will expand to fill the time allotted and there is a point where you must simply "take the leap." Be wary of postponing the implementation without careful examination of the reasons for the postponement and specific actions taken to prevent procrastination.
- Close supervision will be required during the implementation phase to ensure that employees are using the flexibility which they have gained to the best advantage. Coaching is the best way to achieve maximum guest satisfaction and establish new habits within the regular work routine. The fact that employees can and should cash checks and perform other routine guest transactions regardless of which function they are scheduled to work that day needs to be reinforced consistently.

The common thread which emerges when examining the entire combination process is communication. New standards for performance are developed and effective communication assures that each team member will be able to live up to the expectations of the guest and the organization. After all, the greatest beauty of the system is in its operation: the reduction of lines and waiting time, the increased flexibility in scheduling for peak periods of activity, and the simple joy of being able to respond to a guests request for direction by saying, "At any open window, sir!"