In order to enhance user experience, deliver better output and improve business efficiency, enterprises in the travel and hospitality industry are making concerted efforts to leverage technologies such as internet of things (IoT), artificial intelligence (AI) and cloud. Big data analytics seems to have emerged as the key disruptor in this sector as it helps companies better understand the behaviour and preferences of travellers, and accordingly come up with customised service options. While these technological advancements have provided several benefits, the deployment and management of these ICT solutions is laden with challenges such as heavy capex and opex, maintenance and management of the requisite infrastructure, and the need to stay updated with the rapidly evolving technological space. **Srinivas, Corporate IT Manager, The Leela Palaces, Hotels and Resorts** shares his views on the evolving ICT needs of the sector and future technology trends...

#### What role is ICT playing in the travel and hospitality industry?

There has been a 360-degree integration of ICT services in the travel and hospitality industry. This has enabled businesses to deliver a seamless experience for both guests and employees. The focus is more on the consolidation of multiple solutions to run an integrated set-up and the shift from a product-based approach to a platform-based business model. ICT solutions are being used at the discovery stage itself to provide satisfaction and create seamless trust points for customer loyalty.

### What are the key ICT solutions deployed by your organisation? How have they improved your business performance and efficiency?

At The Leela Hotels & Resorts, our focus is on delivering a good connected platform. For this, we continue to offer quality Wi-Fi that allows guests to connect to things; helps us capture real-time analytics to understand guest needs and improve staff efficiency; enhances guest experience with personalised services; helps us in keeping it simple and setting up an enterprise-class network; and provides agility. Moreover, our focus is to invest in technologies that increase cost savings and enhance guest experience.

We have also enabled room automation and were in fact one of the pioneers in this space. Currently, we are evaluating the use of cloud as a platform.

### How are new-age technologies like AI, cloud, IoT and big data analytics transforming the travel and hospitality industry?

To improve and customise customer experience, hospitality brands are deploying technologies, particularly AI, VR and IoT, which offer a mutually reinforcing equation of excellent services. For example, connected devices already know most things about consumers. I believe that AI, VR and IoT are converging as far as the hospitality industry is concerned. At Leela Palaces, Hotels and Resorts, we have already deployed in-room automation and continue to look for upcoming features that can enhance guest experience.

# What are the challenges faced by your organisation in managing the existing IT and telecom infrastructure, and deploying new technologies?

High capex and opex is one of the biggest challenges in deploying new technologies. Also, the rate at which the technology becomes obsolete is very high and it is very challenging to keep up with the changes. For instance, video-on-demand was very popular among guests, but now it has been taken over by Netflix, Firestick, etc.

## Going forward, what are the key technology trends that will shape the future of the travel and hospitality industry?

Going forward, robotics, VR and blockchain are the key technologies that will shape the future of the travel and hospitality industry. Robots are becoming common helpers in hospitality, with their increasing presence in hotels and restaurants around the world. From Japan's all-robot hotel to Hilton's robot concierge and Savioke's autonomous delivery robot, robots that serve hotel staff and guests are a growing trend. Moreover, robots are proving their value in restaurants, too, preparing meals, taking orders and even delivering food.

In the hospitality industry, VR has become particularly important, because of the amount of information an average customer needs before actually booking a hotel room. Rather than reading through descriptions, which may or may not be trustworthy, VR offers customers the chance to experience things for themselves.

Blockchain technology has several advantages in the hospitality industry, with the most obvious being security and stability. For instance, all data is decentralised and traceable, and the database can never go offline, or be removed through a cyberattack, which helps in securing financial transactions.

In addition, the technology can play a vital role in simplifying payments. Currently, the process is somewhat complicated, especially when dealing with overseas settlements. With the use of blockchain technology, the entire process can potentially be streamlined and made more transparent, thus increasing trust.

Furthermore, the travel industry relies on information being passed on between multiple different companies. Blockchain can make both accessing and storing information much easier, allowing enhanced collaboration and ultimately improving the overall travel experience for customers.

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