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Sixty minutes with Peninsula's Ingvar Herland

Interview with [Ingvar Herland](#)  by [Terence Ronson](#) 

Hong Kong's iconic Peninsula Hotel recently underwent a major technology upgrade. The man behind the job was Ingvar Herland, the company's General Manager for Research & Technology – or as he was once described in James Bond terms, the Peninsula's "Q". On behalf of The Hotel Yearbook, Terence Ronson caught up with Ingvar and files this report on their conversation.

THE HOTEL YEARBOOK: Ingvar, the Peninsula just went through a major renovation, including an upgrade of the hotel's technology. What was done?

INGVAR HERLAND: A full renovation took place of the 298 suites and guestrooms and as part of that, the technology infrastructure was rebuilt in order to be future oriented to support the latest technology. This included new cabling, both vertically and horizontally, all the way to the room, LAN switches, and also the nerve center with a PABX, servers and also replacing the old SMATV system with an IPTV system.

We wanted a completely new in-room technology system by using the latest touch technology, not only for tablets but also wall panels, remotes, and the telephone set.

Why did you feel you needed to do it?

The existing technology was already 12-13 years old, and it was definitely time for an upgrade. And since the general renovation was going to take place, the timing was perfect.

How long did the project take?

First we took out the Tower – that had a six-month timeline. Then once that was completed, the main building was done. Overall, the project lasted 16-18 months.

Was this an evolution to say what was done in Tokyo and Shanghai?

Partly you could say that, but really we pushed it a big step forward. Those were new hotels, and this is purely a renovation. Lessons were learned at those projects, especially the logic in the way the room operates, but technology used in Hong Kong was a big step. For example, you will see some



similarity with wall panels in Shanghai, which use hard keys. But here in Hong Kong, they have evolved to touch screens. Overall, you will feel the underlying thinking as to how we want to control the room.

Since renovation, what has been the reaction from Guests – old and new?

In principle, the feedback has been very positive – we’ve had very few complaints. To be honest, we were scared to take Peninsula Hong Kong to a high tech environment, so we spent a lot of time planning on usability and intuitiveness so the guest would have a great experience. Feedback from surveys, interviews and various forms of guest interactions show that we achieved well over 90% acceptance, meaning it has been a success. There are very few people who didn’t like what we’ve achieved with the technology.

Have you made any changes to the technology based on the feedback you received?

A lot of modifications were made during the internal testing phase in our Lab and mock-up room – especially for firmware allowing us to optimize the room. But no further changes have been necessary since deployment based on guest feedback.

How much did it cost?

The entire renovation cost HK\$400 million for Peninsula Hong Kong, with the technology element accounting for between 10 and 20%, depending what you include in that number.

What major partners were involved?

We worked with these companies:

- IPTV – iBahn (customized version)
- Tablet – Intellity (customized version)
- Samsung - TV and tablet
- Guest room phone – VTECH (customized version)
- PABX – NEC

There are also a lot of smaller component and system companies in China who are doing customized work for us. For example, the remote control, relay board to control lighting and the card reader.

What was the hardest part of the project?

Without a doubt, the most challenging part was system integration. Interfacing with all other systems: PABX, IPTV, various servers, and content management. For example, if you do a change of language on one system, then there are different protocols that need to be handled and converted for each system.

What was done for the in-room tech at Hong Kong?

We implemented touch wall panels that change language based on guest preferences. We now have eleven languages. The tablet replaces the bedside panel, and the telephone has a touch panel. The remote control also has a touch LCD with few hard keys. There is still the hands-free phone by the bath, WC and vanity.

In the future, the restaurant menu will be on tablet, and guests can order from that – rooms are far more interactive. Apart from that, Peninsula Hong Kong has free Internet access, free VOD and unlimited free IDD calls based on the Skype gateway – this is very popular.

Was this done by yourself or via an integration partner?

It was done by us and is a fundamental part of Peninsula’s proprietary technology.

↓

How many people are in your team – the Research and Technology Department?

There are 25 people in the team.

Are they dedicated specifically to the hotels?

They are dedicated to the Group, i.e. Hong Kong and Shanghai Hotels. So 90% of their activity is for hotels, and 10% for other group functions. One of the initiatives the group is working on is an upgrade to the system in the vintage Rolls Royce, but then again that goes to the hotels. Sometimes they may work on initiatives at The Repulse Bay or St. George's Building, where we are now.

Now that the Hong Kong property is working, what's next?

Well, we have six people in Paris right now, and later they will shift to a support role. We're also in the early planning stages for new projects, such an 80-room hotel in Myanmar.

Is what you are doing in Paris similar to Hong Kong?

Yes, Paris is very similar to what we did in Hong Kong, and is due to open mid-2014. We are playing a supervisory role there, overseeing contractors. All of our documentation had to be translated into French for this project.

Who supports the technology?

Each hotel has an ELV team, and we train these local people to support it. Once implemented, it's handed over to the operation. First line support is handled locally, and escalated back to the team if there are any other issues. We do regular follow-ups and visits, ensuring preventative maintenance is also done.

How do you decide what to do, and more importantly, what not to do?

Paris is very similar to what we have done in Hong Kong, and is being incorporated into our Corporate Standards – a big book. This forms the basis of what we do, and need to comply with. It's a baseline for designing how it should be integrated and work. Right now, it's being updated based on Peninsula Hong Kong. Peninsula has standards for everything!

If there is a new concept or idea, how does that get implemented?

Ideas can come in from within the team, and also from the hotel itself. What we would do is build hardware in the Lab, and if it passes the test, the next would be to put it into our test room environment – at a secret location. Based on the results, it may or not be rolled out, either to an existing hotel or a new project.

Is there anything you feel you would have done differently?

Absolutely. There are many issues that could have been done differently, and that will be the case beyond Paris. That's not to say we regret or made any mistakes, it's more about configuration and software implementation.

We may look at other hotels for inspiration and see industry trends, but the reality of deployment is down to us – and those are the challenges we face. No one does it to the detail and complexity that we do.

Was there ever an idea that was rejected?

Yes, there was. We had the idea of incorporating a weighing scale in the luggage rack – but that did not work out for various reasons. Good idea – just not practical for our guests.

Is there any advice you would give to people who think they can copy what you've done?

If money is not a problem – they have to be aware that there is a steep learning curve to get all these things right. Of course you can go into Peninsula and see what we've done, then bring together a group of skillful people and take it to your level. But, a lot of time will be required, especially refining small things. If things don't work well, the guest will be irritated and the business suffers.

Is the Hong Kong project completed?

Yes, it's pretty much finished. Just one suite remains – Marco Polo, and that will be live by July.

What's next?

We're looking into new ways of controlling the room, such as voice and gesturing. We're also exploring the use of sound and colors. These will be interesting for the future, and we're watching closely how they evolve.

Ingvar Herland is the General Manager, Research & Technology for the Hong Kong and Shanghai Hotels, Limited.



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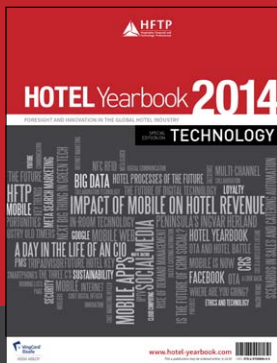
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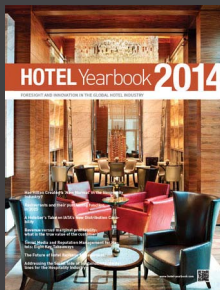
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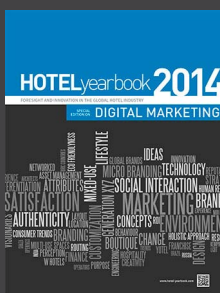
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Hotel Yearbook 2014

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