

Issues of security in hotels

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Abstract

This article reports the findings of in-depth interviews with security managers from some of London's top hotels. What emerges is a range of different approaches to executing security policy. Key issues are identified in relation to the balance between providing hospitality and security, the degree of overt security, and the contribution that security staff make to the success of the business. Whilst there is a shift away from a focus on security against criminal threat towards broader concerns with health and safety, these hotels have not yet adopted the loss prevention strategies developed in the USA.

Introduction

This article discusses the findings of research into hotel crime and security. Whilst security is a well-established management practice in the industry, very little research has looked at behavioural aspects of hotel security. The trade press and hospitality textbooks focus on security objectives, organisation of security personnel and physical security devices. But very little is known about the day-to-day issues and challenges that security staff face in attempting to assure the hotel environment is safe from all kinds of threat. In this article we identify the nature of these issues and how security managers in hotels deal with them.

Researching security

The original purpose of the study reported on here was not to look at security at all. It was to develop a qualitative understanding of the nature of hotel crime in London. Of particular interest were three issues, namely the types of criminal activity in hotels, the influence of specific characteristics of the hotel itself on this activity, and other factors that may influence crime. In order to do this the security managers of hotels were interviewed. However, in the course of the study it quickly emerged that these managers faced a number of issues and challenges in terms of how they went about their task. Following a pilot interview, all subsequent interviews were adapted in order to explore these security issues more fully. And it is this aspect of the research on which we shall focus here.

In view of this, the research is essentially phenomenological, in the sense that no specific literature review on security was conducted prior to the study. Subsequently, a

search revealed most field research has focused on issues of crime and terrorism (see, for instance, Bach, 1996; Pizam and Mansfield 1996; Pizam *et al.*, 1997; Pizam, 1999; Prideaux and Dunn, 1995; Ryan, 1993). Most, if not all, published work about hotel security derived from the trade press, especially *Security Management*. In these sources, the focus of attention is on practice, often in individual hotels, or on security products and devices. There is no discussion of many of the issues that arise from this study.

The eight hotels researched were all large, four- and five-star properties located in the Central London area. These hotels typically have high average room rates and are visited by all major market segments. In every case, these hotels employed a manager specifically with responsibility for security. In many cases these managers were former police officers. These hotels were selected specifically because they provide "extreme" examples of hotels in a high traffic, tourist destination with relatively sophisticated security procedures. Patton (1990) and Stake (1995) agree that more can be learned from intensively studying extreme or unusual cases than can be learned from statistical depictions of what the average case is like. Whilst generalisations from these eight may not be possible (except possibly about other London hotels of a similar size), an understanding of security issues in these hotels may provide valuable insight into the issues in general.

In each hotel, the security manager was interviewed using a semi-structured questionnaire based on the issues that arose from the pilot study. Interviewees were asked both open questions (such as "how do you go about security in this hotel?") and a series of closed questions (such as "has the hotel closed circuit television (CCTV) surveillance?"). The interviews, which lasted



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from between 50 to 90 minutes, were taped and subsequently transcribed. In most cases, the manager also gave a tour of the hotel demonstrating approaches to security on the premises. Transcripts of each interview were then analysed by manual coding to identify the managers' opinions on each specific topic. In presenting the findings, the views of the respondents are presented almost verbatim. No assumption is made as to the generalisability of the findings and where contrary evidence emerges this is presented, reflecting the exploratory nature of the research. Quotes from respondents have been selected solely on the basis of those that are articulate and succinct with respect to the topic of study. Limits of space preclude the provision of full transcripts or multiple quotes.

Role of security staff

Although the main objectives of the security managers in all eight hotels are more or less the same, there are some differences in the way the respondents see security within a hotel. Security manager E puts it simply:

To create a safe and secure environment within the hotel.

Security manager H puts it slightly differently:

... the protection of the guests and staff, the property within the hotel and the hotel itself.

Security manager C believes that the main objective is crime prevention or crime detection, which should lead to crime prevention. This will lead to loss prevention, and thereby to profit enhancement. He takes a broader view of his role than most other security managers by directly linking it to the profit of the hotel. Crime prevention is the main objective for security manager F as well:

In all seriousness, we do arrest people, but really we haven't reached our objective if we have to arrest someone. We should be stopping people from wanting to steal here in this hotel in the first place.

Security manager B is of the opinion that currently his main objective is to re-identify the role of what traditionally was called the security department in a modern hotel. The scope of hotel security is changing and security manager B thinks that the main objective should be to reassess the security department and redefine the roles and responsibilities it should have.

Increasingly, this function also has to deal with health and safety issues in their department. Some security managers even believe it to be a bigger part of their job than

crime prevention, especially on a day-to-day basis:

A lot of hotels are now directing health and safety towards their security manager, because health and safety is definitely becoming more and more important every year.

Security manager D thinks that, especially since the start of the European Union, the laws and regulations regarding health and safety have become quite complex. Hotels are starting to realise that they have to get people in to deal with all the legislation. He believes half of his job has to do with crime prevention, and the other half with health and safety. Security managers F, G, H and E all mentioned the importance of the health and safety side of their job. The official job title of security manager B is actually operations support manager:

If you go back to the 1970s when most hotels started to get security departments ... the objective for security guards was to keep the terrorists out and keep the prostitutes out.

With the terrorist bombing threat significantly reduced and prostitution curtailed, general managers identified that they had employees that they can use to handle all the fire and health and safety legislation. According to security manager B, security accounts for only 20 percent of his work on a day-to-day basis.

Security versus hospitality

In general, hotel security managers confirm that the hotel environment is one which is difficult to make completely secure. Five of the security managers made reference to this, as is illustrated by security manager E:

At the end of the day, if you liken a hotel to a small village or a small town, we have all the facilities here, you have the houses, the bars, the banks ... Everything that happens on the streets generally can happen in a hotel.

People die, sudden deaths, natural, people commit suicides, murders. Everything that can happen outside can happen in a hotel, everything.

The difficulty is that a hotel is open 24 hours a day, seven days a week and all year round. Security manager F:

We can't put padlocks on things, because we want people to come through the door. It is not like an office block where you stop people ... Here we say, "Please come in and use our bars and our restaurants". You know, we are a hospitality industry.

Moreover, hotel operators deliberately set out to create the atmosphere of a safe place. People often lower their guard as soon as

they enter a hotel building, according to security manager G, because:

... people are at their lowest point of guard when they are in a building which they treat as their home ... So when you go through public transport areas, airports, you tend to keep a close eye on your personal belongings ... you tend to be pretty much alert. But once you walk through a building into a nice environment, you have arrived and safely managed to travel there.

Security manager H notes the difficulty of security in a hotel, because of the fact that it is a public place and everyone can come in and walk around. This means that also the undesirable people can come in; so besides being hospitable the security must be in place to prevent problems.

Security manager E said that the key is to find the fine balance between making guests feel secure and being obtrusive:

You can go to the extreme of having a uniformed security officer at each door, but what would you achieve? "I am not going in there, because obviously they have problems."

This is the opinion of most of the security managers interviewed. Guests will have to know that there is security if they want it. They do not feel that the visible presence of security personnel and systems is jeopardising the hospitality feeling.

According to security manager F, it is impossible to ensure maximum security while at the same time maintaining high hospitality standards; there always has to be a compromise. He does think that in the last years it has become much more acceptable to have overt security systems in place, and that because of the technical advances the systems will become more discrete and unobtrusive. This will make the issue of security versus hospitality a lot less troublesome. Security manager G agrees that it is all about finding the balance. He believes that, if you display too much, you can invite more crime, "because you are always going to get someone who thinks they are better than you" and you are advertising that there is a lot of crime in your hotel.

All the security managers found that, from the guest point of view, security is a lot more accepted in hotels now than it was 20 years ago. This is because security has become a part of life and cameras can be found in many shops, stations and at street corners. To have cameras in hotels is no longer a big issue. Security manager D:

It is a common thing anywhere you go in London. If you were to walk to the West End, to Soho, I couldn't count the number of cameras that have taped you.

Most people nowadays do not complain about cameras in hotels, and when they do it usually means that they have something to hide, which is the general opinion among the security managers.

Some security managers notice the old-fashioned approach of hotel senior managers towards security. Those managers still see security mainly as an expense, because, unlike many other departments within the hotel, it does not bring in any revenue. Therefore, if there is no crime, they do not see the need to have security. They do not think about the fact that the possible reason for the small amount of crime could be the security on the property. Security manager F illustrates this:

Security officers are an ongoing cost, month after month after month. And we don't make any money, we don't bring any revenue in. And you know what general managers are like? "That bloody department is costing me lots of money. What are they actually achieving?"

Security manager H agrees with this. He believes that most hotels do not like paying out for security because it is non-productive as far as revenue is concerned. Most security managers, however, do feel that the general managers of the hotels in which they are currently working view security as an important department.

The elements of a good security system

The security managers had quite different opinions on what the main characteristics of a good security systems are. Security manager D believes the priorities are a good electronic locking system, a good camera system and a good communication system. Security manager H believes that the main element of a good security system is the fact that room access can be recorded and studied. Second, CCTV and the location of the cameras are important so that vulnerable areas can be covered without the actual presence of security. Security manager A thinks in more general terms:

... it is having the systems in place and enforcing it, making sure that it doesn't get forgotten about.

According to him, security is something that has to be part of the daily routine in the hotel. An important part of this is that honest members of staff are rewarded and openly praised, because they are the ones that provide the security with extra eyes and ears. Security manager B also thinks that a good security system is one that day-to-day is

inherent in the running of the hotel. Security procedures have to be incorporated in the running of the hotel, and not developed after the hotel experienced a problem:

It is one that in the day-to-day workings of a hotel just blends into the background, but still achieves what you are trying to achieve.

According to security manager G, it is also about establishing close relationships with the other members of staff, so that they think of calling security when they see something suspicious. Members of staff are a very important element of a good security system, as is illustrated by security manager E:

If you take a hotel's security department, here there are six of us. We have a staff in the hotel of 140 people; by induction and training these 140 people will also be security officers.

In other words, by including other members of staff, the hotel has a lot of extra eyes and ears to aid in security. Communication throughout the hotel is considered to be extremely important by security manager C, as well as job separation.

Security manager F believes in the importance of having a security team. If you have a team of security officers who work well together, there is a lot you can manage without:

... a good security team, who interact well with staff and are actively involved with the running of the hotel, rather than being like "that is not my job, we are just dealing with security."

He is a firm believer that members of staff will only talk to you if they are used to talking to you. Therefore the security department needs to be integrated into the main stream of the hotel, and not acting in isolation from the rest.

Behavioural security practices

The size of the security department seems to vary quite a bit in the hotels sampled.

Security manager A has a department of five people including himself, as does security manager G. Hotel E has a security department of six persons. Hotel B has a staff of ten persons dealing with operations support and hotel C has the biggest security department of the hotels sampled with a staff of 12 persons. Security managers D, F and H did not reveal their number of security staff. The size of the security departments does not always reflect the size of the hotel. The decision of how many security personnel are walking around seems to depend mainly on the general manager's view of the need for security. Or, as security manager H put it, hotels take the minimum number of security

personnel that is required by the insurance companies.

In all the hotels visited, the security personnel do not wear a specific uniform. In hotel E, all the security staff are in plain clothes. In addition to the in-house security, the hotel has contract firms which are mainly hired for the back door and to complement the in-house team in the evening and at night. They are in uniform. Security manager B does not see anything wrong with a uniform and, although his staff are mainly in suits, some are in uniform:

Hotel thieves know they are there, they know when they come in what the security team looks like ... so a security officer in the lobby, although a guest might not necessarily pick him up, the thieves will.

He does mention the importance of being able to blend in and be unobtrusive when in a suit, for example, in a restaurant:

You can have a uniform in places where a uniform is not out of place but, in an eating or drinking area, sometimes a uniform is seen as obtrusive.

The security team in hotel C are all in suits and they have a name badge "which appears/disappears as necessary." Security manager C is, like security manager B, of the opinion that:

... a security officer will spot a thief, it doesn't matter what they are wearing, and a thief will spot a security officer, it doesn't matter what they are wearing.

He does feel that uniforms might be useful in some occasions. "It's horses for courses, the right thing for the right job" but the usefulness of being able to blend when you are in a suit is very important.

Security manager H does not have any uniformed staff, apart from at the staff entrance, where they patrol the staff and the contractors coming into the hotel. He does not believe it is to make the guests feel more secure or to deter criminals, but more to make sure that people are talking to security on an equal basis:

Because, no matter what anybody says, a uniform sort of detracts from the importance of the person, especially in an environment like this.

All the hotels have patrols, though they might not be very regular. In hotel F, the security patrols the area at least once every shift and twice every night shift. Other areas might be patrolled more often when there is something on, like, for example, the banqueting suites. Public areas need to be patrolled virtually constantly, so the security officers have to be in the lobby and other public areas whenever they can. In hotel G,

the security officers patrol the hotel once an hour. The rest of the time is mainly spent in the lobby or out front "... because that is where things are going to happen." The security does extra patrols at night, because the staff gets reduced but the threat of fire, thefts and other disturbances will increase. "So you are basically maximising a threat level but minimising staff level." Security manager D says that, effectively, every member of staff working in the hotel is on patrol, at least that is what they are told in the induction. Security manager E increases his patrols outside the hotel at night. This is because Hotel E has a problem with prostitutes on a road at the back of the hotel, which the prostitutes use with their clients. While security managers D, E, F, and G are increasing the number of patrols at night, security manager A believes that most things happen during the day because there are more people around. In addition, normally there is only one security officer on at night. That is why in hotel A there are fewer patrols in the night than during the day.

External liaison

Security manager C puts it as follows:
Information, intelligence are our raw material.

The security managers are in regular contact with one another. They all know one another because they have been in the industry for quite a lot of years, even though they have changed hotels. The different hotels located throughout London have regular meetings once a month organised by the Hotel Intelligence Unit (HIU) of the London Metropolitan police, where specific problems are discussed and information is passed on. These meetings are arranged per area. Most security managers go to every meeting, but security manager H only goes once or twice a year:

because our problems are sort of different here and also if it means travelling away from here, I don't like to be away for sort of three hours going to a meeting.

In addition, the security managers share information once a month or whenever something happens. Most of the hotel thieves are known and travel from one hotel to the next, so, if one hotel experiences a problem, it is likely that another hotel will be next. The hotels operate a circulation system among themselves, which is run by hotel C. Security manager C is trying to adopt air call pagers, so that all the hotels can be reached instantaneously. Currently the circulation system is based on a telephone ring-around

system. Each hotel has two or three other hotels to contact about situations like "people who set fire to their room, don't pay the bills ... and of course bad staff, staff who ripped you off." Security manager B thinks that the set-up is very old-fashioned, because only security issues and no health and safety issues are addressed. He believes this should be improved:

They should include the meetings to cover those areas, which I think will be interesting to see what you have to say about them.

Most security managers will report any incident to the police that the victim wants to have reported, including security managers A, D, and F. "Whatever type of criminal activity it is, you always have to offer the victim the services of the police," according to security manager D. Security manager G reports:

Criminal damage, thefts, drugs, anything like that ... and that goes for staff as well.

Security manager H believes that some incidences are just not worth reporting to the police. Some clients do not want to have the police involved, particularly in cases where it involves a call girl.

Conclusion

This study has identified a number of issues:

- it seems highly probable that security staff focus on all aspects of security, increasingly on matters relating to statutory regulations concerning fire, health and safety and not just criminal activity;
- there is a fine balance between providing hospitality and ensuring security;
- there is no consensus as to whether uniformed security staff provide a greater or lesser sense of safety amongst guests;
- different security managers adopt different practices for assuring security, especially with regard to patrolling the property.

There is some degree of consensus on two main issues. Managers value greatly information and intelligence about potential threats. They are generally proactive in sharing such information between themselves and also in working with the HIU of the Metropolitan Police. However, the focus of this tends to be on issues of security against crime, rather than the more general issues of health and safety that now play a major part in their role. All managers also agree that technology is a great asset to them and utilise a range of technologies to assure security – CCTV, communication devices,

and so on. However, their option to utilise such technology is often constrained by the attitude of the hotel general manager who controls the capital budget.

Finally, there is some *prima facie* evidence to suggest that these London hotels are relatively unsophisticated in their approach when compared with North American practice. In the USA, in both hotels and restaurant chains, the concept of loss prevention has been adopted. This has many of the features described by respondents in this study but is even more wide-ranging than the approach described above. For instance, the loss control manual for one major chain makes explicit reference to goals connected with reducing insurance costs and reducing accidents at work. With regard to policies and procedures, the manual refers to such things as COSSH, risk assessments, first aid training, and a range of other elements not yet evident in UK security management practice. It would seem that UK operators might benefit from a review of the strategic role that loss prevention may play in the success of their business and adapt their current approach in this context.

Recommendations

This small-scale study clearly identifies the need for further research and practice development. Research should focus on the contingent nature of security practice and attempt to identify the variables that affect policy and practice in this area. At least four potential influences emerge from this study – the location of the hotel property, the design of the building, the attitude of the general manager, and the background and training of the security manager.

Within the industry there is a clear need for a forum that provides hotel operators with the opportunity to discuss the nature

and role of the security department. UK practice, or at least practice in London, seems to suggest a more narrow interpretation of the function than the loss control approach adopted in other countries. The shift from a security focus to a loss prevention focus could be assisted by research into the hidden savings achievable by an effective loss prevention strategy. This would shift the operator's perspective from one in which security was seen as a cost centre to one in which it was a driver of revenue and profit.

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