

ENCOURAGING ENVIRONMENTAL MANAGEMENT AMONG SMALL AND MEDIUM ACCOMMODATIONS (SMAs) THROUGH E-LEARNING INITIATIVE

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ABSTRACT

This paper is a continuance of an empirical work on hotels in a developing country and its acceptance on environmental impact. The study measured the responsiveness of small and medium accommodations (SMAs) in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia towards environmental management, by means of their awareness, attitudes and opinion on the meaning, marketability and practicality of environmental management in an accommodation property. A combination of quantitative and qualitative approach was used for the study.

The study found those respondents' perceptions on the meaning, marketability and practicality of environmental management that SMAs are generally positive about the relevance of environmental issues in their operations and their role in it. However, the SMAs do not go beyond the basic common sense of cutting their water and energy costs.

The chief reason for the lack of motivation to do more is lack of awareness on how to adopt environmental management in their operations. The study also found path towards a wider adoption of environmental management among SMAs is still rough because there is very little pressure from the authorities and relevant stakeholders for them to change. Without external drivers, it is difficult to expect SMAs to go beyond their normal business activity as internal constraints and lack of guidance on how to play a more significant role in sustainable development are hampering such move.

To overcome the lack of drivers, this paper is proposing e-learning as a way to promote wider understanding and acceptance on environmental management for SMAs. Thus, the paper discusses the situation by addressing key issues such as students, teachers and organizational issues, information technology delivery design and top level support, outcome assessment, flexibility as well as supplement versus substitute issues.

Keywords: Small and medium accommodation, e-learning, environmental management, mentoring system

INTRODUCTION

The relationship between business and the environment is now well documented (cf. Fischer and Schot, 1993; McDonagh and Prothero, 1977). Interests on environmental degradation began in the 1960s in Western Europe and North America, prompted by incidents such as heavy smog caused by industrial activities in London¹. In the 1970s, civil society started to realize more clearly the negative environmental consequences of business activities. However, the predominant focus of civil movements (such as the 'Greens' in Germany) on conservation-related issues at the time led business to disregard the environment as a threat to its operation and reputation. Business's traditional response towards environmental issues remained antagonistic with little care about the costs of business activities towards the environment (Utting, 2000). In fact, environmental protectionism was considered a nuisance to business enterprise for the most part. Businesses tended to deny or avoid their environmental responsibilities and opposed those developments designed to control performance (Tilley, 1999). Hence, business generally remained in denial of its environmental responsibility, despite the development of increasingly complex pollution control legislation in many parts of Western Europe, North America and Japan.

In developing countries, the situation was much less encouraging. The lack of civil movement pressure and governments' lack of interest, experience and resources to regulate business's impacts on the environment, absolved businesses operating in those countries of responsibility for their negative environmental impacts. Environmental regulations, where these existed, were often complex, contradictory and vague (Perry and Singh, 2002; Global Environmental Forum, 2000). Developing countries' strong desire to achieve economic development also contributed to the generally low regard for environmental management. High priority for economic development at the expense of the environment, coupled with lack of strong civil pressure, reflects the Malaysian experience in its development context in the 1970s.

In the 1980s, a series of environmental disasters including the Bhopal chemical spill and the Exxon Valdez oil spill occurred. These high profile accidents raised global concern about business's negative impacts on the environment. Greater pressure from civil movements and demand from customers for environmentally friendly products led business to reconsider its response towards environmental issues. Within the same decade, an increase in regulatory mechanisms for environmental protection including new project appraisal techniques such as Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) further influenced the relationship between business and the environment. In the latter part of the 1980s, a report by the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) entitled '*Our Common Future*', helped to reinforce the importance of sustainable development.

THE GLOBALIZATION OF RESPONSIBLE BUSINESS PRACTICE: The Increasing Relevance Of Business Environmentalism In The Service Industry

The *Agenda 21* developed during the Earth Summit in Rio has highlighted the role of service providers in environmental issues. In tourism, for example, the Secretary-General in a United Nations Economic and Social Council Report (1999: 11-12) emphasized the following:

¹ This incident prompted the Clean Air Legislation in the 1970s.

The central challenge for the tourism industry is to transform itself, in all its forms, into a sustainable activity by reorienting corporate philosophy, practice and ethics to promote sustainable development through, inter alia, better environmental management and practices and close partnerships with Government and civil society...Tourism enterprises, both large and small, should integrate environmental management systems and procedures into all aspects of corporate activity in order to reorient their management at all levels towards sustainable development. This fundamental reorientation of management philosophy and practice will necessitate the implementation of, inter alia, environmental audits, lifecycle assessments and training of staff in the principles of sustainable tourism management.

After the Rio summit, the World Tourism Organization (WTO), World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC) and Earth Council have taken initiatives to introduce a global environmental program for the travel and tourism industry. In North America, Tourism Canada (cited in Murphy, 1994:279) proposes that all resources affected by tourism development be managed 'in such a way that we can fulfill economic, social and aesthetic needs, while maintaining cultural integrity, essential ecological processes, biological diversity and life-support systems'.

In many developed countries, the concept of green hotels or properties managed according to business practices that help improve the environmental performance of the environmental facilities is not new. Many well established hotel chains such as Holiday Inn Hotel Group, Canadian Pacific, The Intercontinental Hotel Group, Ramada and Forte Hotels have positioned themselves as corporate bodies that are more environmentally friendly through the efficient use of energy, water, and materials while providing quality services (see Kasim, 2005). These green hotels conserve and preserve by saving water, reducing energy use, and reducing solid waste. They have seen benefits such as reduced costs and liabilities, high return and low-risk investments, increased profits, and positive cash flows. Identifying these benefits and incentives has allowed the popularity of green hotels to grow.

In United States, organizations such as the Green Hotel Associations have been established to encourage environmentally-friendly in-room practices such as towel reusing (Kirk, 1995; Enz and Siguaw, 1999) while several European Union countries have conducted Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) in tourism projects, and have introduced environmental laws and codes of conduct in the light of increased awareness of the environmental impact of tourism (Dimitrios and Ladkin, 1999; Cheney and Barnett, 2001).

Success stories proliferated through publicity on award schemes such as The IH&RA Environmental Award conducted in association with the UNEP. In 2005, The Meliá Jardim Europa in São Paulo, Brazil was chosen as the winner in the chain category notably for its innovative 'Green Floor Project' which recreates the tropical Brazilian forest inside the hotel. The Green Floor Symbol is displayed throughout the property and is comprised of three green leaves symbolizing the 3 Rs – reduce, reuse, and recycle. Guests are encouraged to contribute to the World Wildlife Fund and the hotel would then match each donation.

This makes the project a holistic approach to sustainability where all the actions adopted by the management are clearly visible to the guests and are fortified by their contribution.

The same award recognized The Monterey Inn Resort and Conference Center in Ontario, Canada for its Carbon Neutral program that inculcates consumer awareness through encouraging them to calculate their carbon dioxide (CO₂) produced during their own travel and offers ways to offset the CO₂ emissions by taking part in the Tree Canada Foundation's carbon credit program.

The hotel collects the cost of planting trees from the customer and facilitates the planting of trees with the Tree Canada Foundation. Consequently, hundreds of trees are being planted on behalf of guests. Spice Village in Kerala, India was awarded for using customer feedback to improve the hotel's environmentally best practice initiatives. The guests are encouraged to pen down their valuable suggestions on environmental issues, which make their stay an engaging experience.

The 3 Rivers Eco Lodge & Sustainable Living Centre in Dominica, West Indies was recognized for integrating communication "as a structural part of its offer by setting up a 'sustainable living centre' that also extends the discussion beyond the 'travel' experience to the guests' every day lives." The work of Fairmont Hotels & Resorts in designing a comprehensive corporate policy to be implemented at the property level is also commended (more details are available at <http://www.ih-ra.org/awards/2005/index.php>).

Some evidences in developing countries also exist. The Caribbean Tourism Industry led by Jamaica made a pact to commit to the Environmental Audits for Sustainable Tourism (EAST) (Meade and Del Monaco, 1999). In South East Asia, advocacy groups such as the Third World Network in Malaysia and the Tourism Investigation and Monitoring Team in Thailand pushed for serious consideration of sustainability issues (Pleumarom, 2000b). Meanwhile in Tanzania, the Conservation, Hotels, Domestic and Allied Workers Union are demanding hotels to be more community friendly (Meade and Del Monaco, 1999). A research by the main author in 2003 however indicated that in the context of Penang, a tourism island in the Northwest of Malaysia, hoteliers were aware of their wider responsibility. Nonetheless, few support systems existed to help hoteliers do more. Lack of drivers and the presence of many barriers have discouraged hoteliers from going beyond basic cost effective measures as stipulated in their respective Standard Operating Procedures.

In addressing environmental matters, larger corporations are at a more advanced stage because they have competitive access to more resources. Many large companies have long been using environmental management as an integral part of their strategy, while smaller companies generally have been reported as more reactive to environmental issues (Roy and Vézina 2001, 344). Many reasons have been identified in the literature to explain the scenario. Among other, the impact of larger companies on the environment tends to be more noticeable and secondly, larger companies tend to have more knowledge in handling multiple stakeholder pressures (Schaper, 2002).

Larger companies also have better access to human and financial resources and have more means at their disposal for influencing administrative authorities when environmental standards are being set (Roy & Boiral, 2003). Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) on the other hand, have less access to resources and too often do much less (individually or as a group) than large businesses to address their negative environmental impacts.

Nonetheless, according to a United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) publication in 2003, SMEs are increasingly becoming the target for environmental pressure. SMEs were cited as a target for awareness-raising efforts and information dissemination at the June 2003 meeting in Marrakech, Morocco, on the development of a ten-year "framework plan" for improving consumption and production patterns (as mandated at the Johannesburg Summit). This comes as no surprise considering the large and increasing number of SMEs in the global trade. In many countries SMEs account for the vast majority of businesses, major shares of exports and the bulk of new jobs. In Australia for example, SMEs are estimated to contribute over 40 per cent of Gross Domestic Products and employ more than half the workforce (Gerrans & Hutchinson, 1998) whereas in Europe, SMEs account for 99.8 per cent of total number of companies in the European Union and two thirds of employment (Hitchens et. al, 2005). In short, SMEs are an important part of most nation's economies as they create jobs, build effective networks and make a positive contribution towards social inclusion (Hitchens et al., 2005).

It has also become increasingly clear that SMEs as a group have a significant environmental impact. The use and purchase of equipment, packaging and waste disposal are some of the ways small companies can affect the environment (Rajendran & Barrett, 2003). The Marshall Report estimates that as much as 60 per cent carbon dioxide emissions from businesses result from the activities of SMEs and the Environment Agency estimates that 60 per cent of the commercial waste and 80 per cent of the pollution accidents result from SMEs in the United Kingdom (Hitchens et. al, 2005).

In the hospitality industry, lack of recycling facilities, little bottles of shampoo, the cold blast of the air conditioner contribute to its environmental inefficiency. Hotels, like other buildings use electricity for lighting, cooling, appliances and fuel for heating. However, hotel structures – individual units that each have their own appliances, heating and cooling sources, combines with hospitality standards, piles of fresh towels and linens, make them more wasteful than traditional buildings. In fact, a lodging property is a small community that purchases goods and services, creates and disposes waste, uses electricity and water, and just like any individual, leaves a distinct environmental footprint.

Furthermore, it is also one of the most dynamic in terms of new construction and renovation and is a huge consumer for furnishings and appliances. In short, it is clear that in today's business environment, large and small companies alike, are facing both challenges and opportunities as they attempt to take advantage of the growing concern for the environment. Companies must continuously maintain and develop resources and competencies that will enable them to sustain their competitive advantage over rivals (Roy and Vézina 2001, 344).

An empirical research on Small and Medium Accommodations (SMAs) in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia showed that despite the availability of tools and approaches to help business become environmentally friendly, the problem has been to persuade SMAs to adopt them. The lack of strong external drivers (from government, nongovernmental organizations, consumers, or trade associations) promotes complacency and ignorance despite their awareness that collectively, SMAs do contribute to environmental damage. The slow adoption of environmental management could be traced to the fact that smaller businesses want to improve their environmental performance but have little knowledge on how to begin. Many do not realize the practicality of some existing measures and even more so fail to recognize that tourism potential earning is at risk once the surrounding physical environment deteriorates. This finding reflects United Nations Industrial Development Organization's (UNIDO) (2002) finding for SMEs in general:

Table: 1
Barriers for SME's adoption of environmental and social responsibility

1	Insufficient technology, expertise, training and capital
2	Lack of initiatives tailored for small companies
3	inadequate understanding of what the business case is for SME environmental and social responsibility
4	the need to deal with more pressing matters such as upgrading the quality of technology, management and marketing
5	price competition
6	limited consumer pressure

adapted from: UNIDO 2002

Therefore raising awareness among SMAs is probably the single most critical factor in encouraging environmental management adoption. Raising awareness is also a prerequisite for changing attitudes, which ultimately lead to changing business practices (Hillary, 1999). It is essential to communicate with hotel managers and front-line personnel about the regulations that govern their activities and promote the potential business benefits of good environmental practice. UNIDO (2002) proposes the raising of awareness by a series of industry based pamphlets. It also proposes collation of relevant environmental regulation in an understandable reference source which would be made available through local government and associations. However, to be effective, the speed at which SMAs get information through pamphlets and booklets made available through the government and associations would depend on the number and frequency of long distance communications (mails, telephone calls) and meetings between the parties. To overcome the problem, a better technology is required and internet is without doubt the best technology available today.

What this paper proposes is using e-learning as an avenue for encouraging more SMAs to learn and adopt environmental management, while addressing key considerations such as student issues, instructor issues, organizational issues, technology-delivery design, information technology and top level supports, outcome assessment, flexibility in a rapidly changing environment and supplemental versus substitute.

Student, Instructor and Organizational Issues

Encouraging SMAs adoption of environmental management involves consideration of a few student issues. Firstly, the students would consist of SMAs management personnel, working adults with very busy schedule. Therefore, convincing them to join in the program in the first place may not be easy. Trade associations committee members, people from tourism related government agencies or leading companies have more credentials to influence the SMAs personnel. However, without a strong government policy or mutual goals among these parties, making an e-learning program to encourage SMAs adoption of environmental management would be impossible.

Technology-Delivery Design and Top Level Support

There is a proliferation of online information about environmental management available today. However, to encourage more participation among SMAs in e-learning about environmental management, there needs to be two complimenting initiatives i.e. the hardware initiatives and the software initiatives (see Figure 1).

The hardware in this case refer to ensuring availability and access to online facility, while the software is some form of mentoring program to compliment the former. Such arrangement is necessary to ensure the effectiveness of e-learning among SMAs on environmental management.

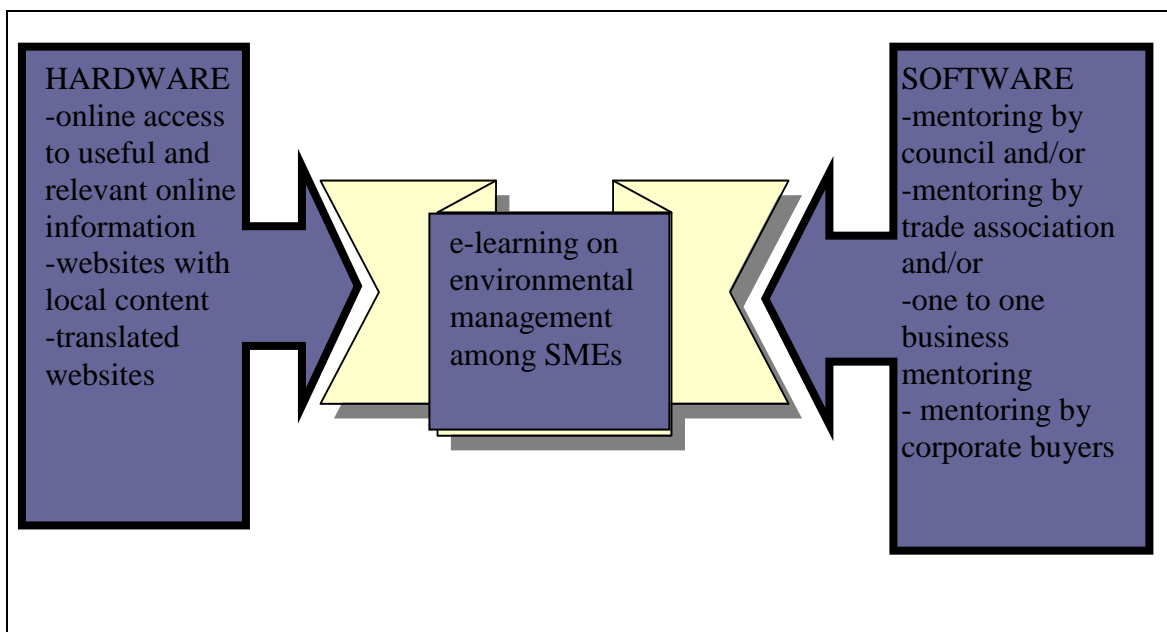


Figure 1
Framework for assisting SME's adoption of environmental management through e-learning

This is particularly true in the context of a developing nation such as Malaysia, where framework for mentoring is non existent and gap between big and

small/medium size business is often big, leaving the latter isolated and grappling for guidance to keep up. Mentors can be very valuable to SME's in terms of helping them on the road to compliance. Through this process, mentors can also demonstrate their commitment to improved environmental performance (de Leeuw & Bubna-Litic, 2000)

In addition, many of these online resources are developed to fit the context of general business, within the context of developed world. Very few online resources are available, to provide specific information that fits the needs of SMAs in a developing country. In fact, there has been no attempt to date to develop an 'one stop center' via a website that organizes and links to all the online resources in a systematic manner. This is a crucial aspect of the hardware initiative mentioned above.

Mentoring could take place in many forms including mentoring by the local council, or cluster mentoring, or one to one business mentoring or mentoring through the supply chain. UNEP (2003) suggests that perhaps the strongest influence on SMEs comes from multinational corporations who demands that their suppliers (including those in developing countries) abide to their social and environmental standards as a precondition for doing business. These standards often come in the form of codes of conduct for individual supply chains or certification systems for entire sectors. de Leeuw & Bubna-Litic (2000) recommend that a strategic alliance be established between local government and the trade associations relevant to the industries in the region to present and establish an education process for SME's in the local government area.

Regardless of the form, mentoring system could address the issue of access (as big companies and/or the government could contribute by subsidizing internet set up in their mentee organizations.

The management team of SMAs need to be given access to online information, be guided to relevant and most useful information (such as good management principles of documentation of processes and line responsibility), and be guided as to how to use the information to implement environmentally friendly practices.

For hotels, there are various websites that offer specific guide to processes and activities that can be emulated by SMAs. Some examples include:

1. Green Hotels Association (www.greenhotels.com)
2. Coalition for Environmentally Responsible Economies (CERES) Corporate Outreach Committee (2000) – Best Practice Survey for Institutional purchasers (www.ceres.org)
3. ECoNETT (2000). EcoNETT good practice: Eco Audits in Resort Hotels – Grecootel. (online) Green Globe 21, Green Globe Manual 1994 (www.wttc.org/Publications.htm)
4. United Nations Environmental Program (2005) (<http://www.unep.org/pc/tourism/library/goodpractices-hotel.htm>)
5. International Hotel and Restaurant Association (IH&RA) (2005) (<http://www.ih-ra.org/awards/2005/index.php>)

However, for developing countries, websites in English may just be as good as an empty page. Limited grasp of English, let alone technical terms and jargon, may limit better comprehension and improvement on their awareness on the website content. Worse, it may lead to lack of interest to seek more information.

To overcome this, there needs to be more websites written in the local language. Translation initiatives by the government with the support of trade associations, could make SMAs be able to comprehend the website contents better, which in return would enhance their awareness and ultimately attitudes towards environmental management. It is also proposed that educational websites with local content related to environmental management in the hotel sector be developed. Some developing countries have already ventured into such initiative. One example is Costa Rica (see www.turismo-sostenible.co.cr), whose government came up with a comprehensive guidelines for its environmental certification programs for hotels.

Therefore, the relevant authorities and key players in Malaysia tourism industry need to look into taking similar initiative. Websites with local content are easier to trust than those with foreign examples because they take into account the local context (climate, business environment, governmental regulations, etc.) in making suggestions and propositions. Tailoring the website contents further into locality (city versus resort), business size (small versus medium), etc would make them more useful to the intended audience.

Finally, the mentoring system would contribute by educating them on environmental practices that suit their businesses, and encouraged to do more by means of recognition or reward programs or certification. It is also important to remember that some SMAs, small size accommodations in particular, may not be able to afford to finance environmental practices that require installation of new equipment or fixtures. Thus, the mentoring system would enhance the probability of fiscal support to them, perhaps through big companies' philanthropic (which in return would enhance their image as responsible business) or in the form of government subsidies.

Outcome Assessment, Flexibility and Supplemental versus Substitute Issues

The outcome of the above program can be assessed using several methods. One way is by a third party audit of the quantity of SMAs environmental management practices of SMAs involved, after the program. However, using a third party may incur costs and is therefore not very feasible. Another way is assessment by the mentors. This is a better approach as it enables closer communication between mentor-mentee organizations.

The issue of flexibility must be addressed delicately in proposing an e-learning program to enhance SMAs adoption of environmental practices. As emphasized in the beginning, such programs involve busy working management personnel with a business to run.

Therefore, the e-learning program must be designed to account for this. In addition, the program should supplement rather than substitute other approaches such as the use of pamphlets and publicity of success stories on hotel's environmental management.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, environmental management among SMAs can be encouraged through properly designed e-learning program that takes into account the myriad online information and framework. The key is to combine the online delivery, with a working mentoring program. In this manner, SMAs would be more inclined and motivated to be involved. Properly implemented, the ultimate outcome of such initiative is more SMAs adopting environmental management, to compliment the already growing numbers of big hotel chains adopting environmental management.

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