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Title:

Managing Employees' Knowledge in International Hotel Companies: A Retrospective Case  
Study of Innov@ccor

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## Abstract

The aim of this paper is to explore how international hotel companies manage and utilise the knowledge of their employees who are geographically scattered all over the world. Accor Hotel Company was selected because its corporate human resource department in Paris developed and utilised an Intranet tool that enabled Accor's employees to suggest ideas to improve the operation of their own hotel or department. The intranet was called Innov@ccor. In this paper we investigate the development and utilisation of Innov@ccor from 2001 to 2012 and how it helped the company to improve its practices, operations and services over the years.

The research method is an exploratory, retrospective, qualitative case study methodology with a netnographic approach. Data were collected through interviews, company reports and information published on the internet about the company.

Our findings show that Accor Company was able to capture thousands of ideas from their employees all over the globe. These ideas were shared between hotels and utilised to create commercial impacts in the following areas: ideas that makes a difference for guests and Ideas that make a difference to employees' daily routine.

## 1- INTRODUCTION

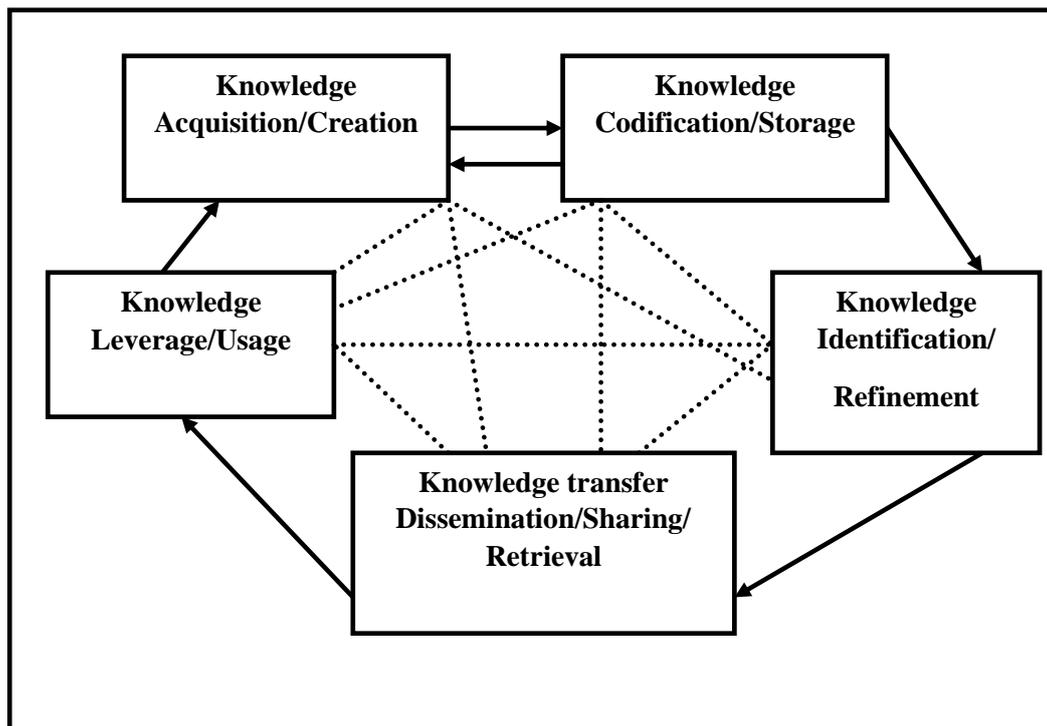
Interestingly, the majority of the international hotel companies follow an "asset-light and fee-oriented strategy" (Sohn et al., 2013). Consequently, the majority of international hotel companies depend more and more on their intangible resources and less on their tangible resources to create value. They attentively focus on branding, developing knowledge and expertise and innovation (Enz 2010; Harrison 2003). Knowledge asset is one of the most important assets; it is considered to be one of the main sources of competitive advantage (Hallin and Marnburg, 2008; Teece, 1998). Therefore, companies need to find ways to management the knowledge asset. The identification of the strategically significant knowledge within and outside the organisation is one of the first steps in knowledge management. Examples of knowledge that can be found outside the organisation are: knowledge in suppliers (Handfield et al., 2015; Quinn, 1999; Un and Rodríguez 2018); knowledge in universities (Howells et al., 2012); knowledge in governmental agencies (Dodds, and Galaski, 2018); knowledge that reside in competitors and knowledge in customers (Gebert et al, 2003; Sigala, 2012). Knowledge sources within the organisations can be in databases and standard operating procedures manuals, knowledge possessed by employees (knowledge in the employees' heads) and knowledge that can be found during practice (knowledge in practice) (Wigg, 2004). In this paper we focus on knowledge source within the organisation. More specifically we focus on how international hotels companies manage and utilise the knowledge of their employees who are geographically scattered all over the world.

## 2- KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT PROCESSES

Knowledge management deals with all processes or features of knowledge in the organization. These include knowledge acquisition/creation; identification/ refinement; codification and storage in repositories (organizational memory); dissemination/ sharing/

retrieval; and leverage/usage (Davenport & Prusak, 2000; Probst et al., 2000; Gupta et al., 2004). Figure 1 shows these processes and how they interact with each other. There is no particular sequence for these processes of knowledge management inside the organization. It is an enduring spiral process that can take the form of a web connecting knowledge processes to one another. Knowledge provides the basis for improvements and innovation in organizations. Each of the knowledge management process will be discussed in details starting with the process of knowledge creation.

Figure 1 Knowledge Management Processes



Source, Hawela (2011); Hawela et al (2013)

### ***2.1 The process of knowledge creation/Acquisition***

One of the most cited models of knowledge creation is the SECI Model by Nonaka (1994) and Nonaka & Takeuchi (1995). At the core of the model is the distinction between tacit and explicit knowledge, and the analysis of the dynamics of knowledge creation through cycles of socialization, externalization, combination, and internalization (SECI cycles) that engage tacit and explicit knowledge across organizational levels.

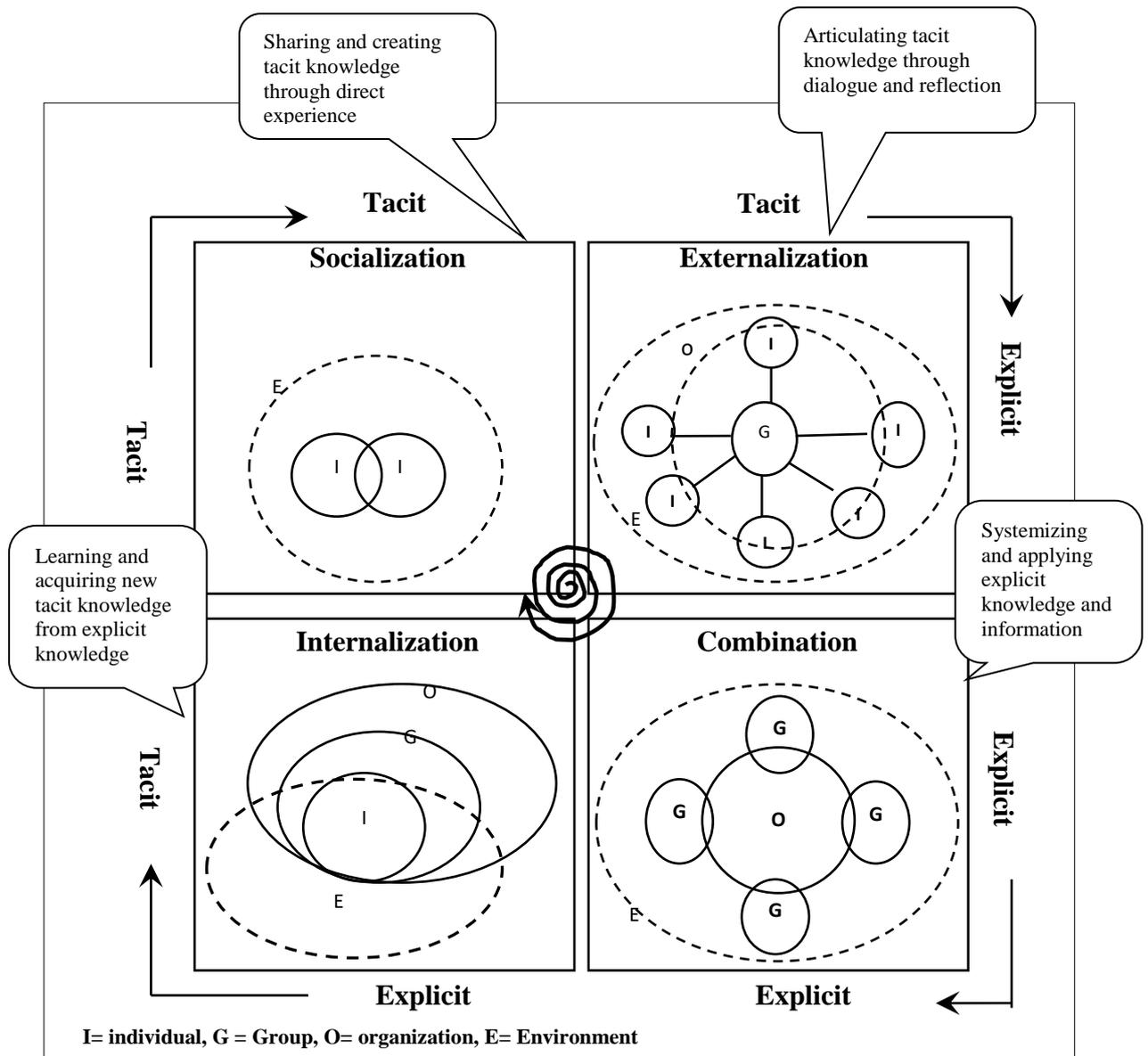
For a firm to harness individualized tacit knowledge and to create new organizational knowledge it needs to manage the process. Knowledge management requires a firm to transform individual tacit knowledge into explicit knowledge through codification, to store it in a repository, to disseminate it throughout the organization and make it easily retrievable by employees so that it can be exploited and applied (Yang and Wan, 2004)

Therefore, it is vital to develop an understanding of how the process of knowledge creation takes place in the firm. (Nonaka, 1994; Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995; Nonaka & Knonno, 1998; Nonaka et al., 2000; Nonaka & Toyama, 2003) have developed the SECI model of

knowledge creation which argues that new organizational knowledge from which innovations arise occurs when tacit individual knowledge is transformed into explicit organizational knowledge.

The process of knowledge creation is manifested as a continuous spiral process where an individual, group and/or organization “transcend the boundary of the old self into a new self by acquiring a new context, a new view of the world, and new knowledge; in short it is a journey from being to becoming” (Nonaka et al., 2000 : p 3).

Figure 2 The SECI Model for Knowledge Creation



Source: Hawela (2011); Hawela et al (2013)

In figure 2 the interaction between tacit and explicit knowledge is referred to as “knowledge conversion” and leads to the creation of new knowledge (Nonaka et al., 2000). The

combination of the two categories makes it possible to conceptualize four conversion patterns: First, Socialization: from tacit to tacit knowledge; employees gather information from internal / external sources and direct experience or they acquire it through observation and other non-formalized means. Second, Externalization: from tacit to explicit knowledge; knowledge can be shared with others and become the basis of new knowledge such as concepts, images, ideas, and written documents. Dialogue is an effective tool to articulate one's tacit knowledge and to share the articulated knowledge with others. To ensure that the knowledge remains explicit it is wise for it to be codified (Gupta, et al., 2004) Third, Combination: from explicit to explicit knowledge; the new explicit knowledge is synthesized and disseminated among members of the organization (international hotel company). The creative use of networks and large scale databases can facilitate this mode of conversion. This phase relies on four organizational processes - capturing, and integrating, disseminating and lastly editing. Fourth, Internalization: from explicit to tacit knowledge; training programs, if properly conducted, help employees understand the organization themselves. Employees can internalize the explicit knowledge gained from the training program, database or intranet and converge it into tacit knowledge with the potential of creating new knowledge

## ***2.2 Knowledge storage, identification, sharing and retrieval processes***

In this stage (of the process of knowledge management) the organization will start dealing with what it knows (Drew, 1999). Figure 1 shows that after knowledge is being created or acquired it should be stored and codified. Therefore, it is not only after knowledge is being created but also during the process of knowledge creation (learning) that knowledge should be stored. These dynamic processes are depicted as two ways arrows between knowledge creation and storage (see figure 2). To avoid losing or forgetting the created or acquired knowledge it must be easily stored, organized and retrieved (Alavi and Leidner, 2001; Fiedler and Welp, 2010; Rowlinson et al., 2010; Walsh and Ungson, 1991).

Knowledge storage, codification, identification and retrieval also refer to the development of THE facility's memory or the stocks of the company's knowledge and the ways for accessing its content (Anand et al. 1998; Moorman and Miner; 1998; Walsh and Ungson, 1991). Many authors have highlighted the importance of developing an organizational memory for example; Huber (1991) emphasizes the vital role played by organizational memory in organizational learning and Anand et al. (1998) noted the important role of organizational memory in decisions making. Further, Huber (1991) explained that the usability of what has been learned by the organizations depends, on a greater extent, on the effectiveness of managing the organization's memory. It is noted by Karl E. Weick; 1979a: 206; In: Walsh and Ungson, 1991 p. 57) "If an organization is to learn anything, then the distribution of its memory, the accuracy of that memory, and the conditions under which that memory is treated as a constraint become crucial characteristics of organizing".

It is salient for the international hotel companies to consider their memories as dynamic rather than static. At the organizational level, memory may lead to keeping the status quo. This could in turn lead to the resistant to learning and change (Alavi and Leidner, 2001; Argyris and Schon, 1978; 1996).

There are multiple views about the nature and types of organizational memory (Rowlinson et al., 2010). THE facility's memory could be viewed in three levels. These levels are individual, group and organizational stocks of knowledge. For individuals and groups to be

able to access the explicit knowledge from organizational memory they will need first to be able to locate the knowledge they need (Anand et al. 1998). Individuals and groups can identify /locate the required tacit knowledge using several approaches. They can search the organization directories, intranet for the holder of the required knowledge (for example if the organization created a list of the subject area experts and what they know). Individuals and groups can announce a request for the required knowledge using organization intranet (Alavi and Leidner, 2001; Anand et al. 1998). An example of the activities which can be related to expert interviews, best practice cases, knowledge brokering (third parties connecting knowledge seekers to knowledge sources), experience reports (documenting positive and negative experiences on projects), databases and professional research services.

Advancements in web information and communication technologies have played an important role in improving the storage, codification, identification and retrieval processes and in building organizational memory (Alavi and Leidner, 2001; Fiedler and Welppe, 2010; Hustad and Teigland, 2008). The final processes of knowledge management that will be discussed here are knowledge transfer, sharing and utilization.

### ***2.3 Knowledge sharing, transfer and utilization***

Kogut and Zander (1992: 383) point out that *“What firms do better than markets is the sharing and transfer of the knowledge of individuals and groups within an organization”*. Therefore, the international hotels companies need to nurture the process of knowledge sharing and transfer between individuals, groups and organizational levels. The processes of knowledge sharing and transfer are inseparable (Tsai, 2001). They are related to the flow of knowledge between different levels; individuals, groups and organization. All teams (including virtual teams) *“must develop mechanisms for sharing knowledge, experiences, and insights critical for accomplishing their missions. Knowledge sharing includes the transfer of existing knowledge among team members and bringing new knowledge into the team”* (Rosen et al., 2007).

There are two approaches to knowledge sharing and transfer in the extant literature. One approach is knowledge sharing and transfer by codification and storage where there is no interpersonal exchange. The second is the sharing and transfer of knowledge through, storage, codification, communications and interpersonal exchange (Hansen et al., 1999; Haas and Hansen, 2007). The first approach can be called human to computer or database interaction. When you use your computer or mobile phone to search the web to get some information, this is an example of the first type of knowledge sharing and transfer (there is no interpersonal exchange).

The second approach to knowledge sharing depends on the interpersonal exchange of knowledge in knowledge sharing networks. The facilitation of knowledge sharing and learning will requires the understanding of various types of knowledge networks (Foss et al., 2010; Ganley and Lampe, 2009; Hansen, 2002). Verburg and Andriessen (2011) suggest four types of knowledge networks: informal networks (an example of this is your network with your friend in Facebook where you share and transfer knowledge and information), second type is question and answer networks, third type is strategic networks, and lastly, online strategic networks. It is important to note that there is no clear boundaries' between these types of knowledge networks. Further, they are not necessarily stable they might have shifting in purpose and membership (Verburg and Andriessen, 2011).

The value and purpose of these different types of network as suggested by Andriessen et al., (2004) are as follows: solving immediate individual problem in a work situation; building a wider perspective in the practices of a group work; developing guideline, best practices, standard operating procedures for the organization; and developing innovative product, services and work practices for the organization.

There are many enablers and barriers to knowledge sharing and transfer (Anantatmula and Kanungo, 2010; Foss et al., 2010; Lee and Choi, 2003; Lilleoere and Hansen, 2011; O'Deli and Grayson, 1998; Tsai, 2001; Yang and Chu Chen, 2007). Encouraging reciprocity and sustaining knowledge exchange by using motivators is one of the enablers (King and Marks; 2008). For example, managers should develop strategies or mechanisms that encourage the interaction and the strength of the relationships among members (Min Chiu et al., 2006). Sharing a common language between individual and groups is another enabler to knowledge sharing and transfer. A language here does not mean the traditional language like German; Arabic; English or any other language. A common language here means sharing assumptions, goals, vision and vocabulary. Sharing a common language will help in encouraging knowledge exchange activities and improve the quality of the shared knowledge (Min Chiu et al., 2006; Tsai and Ghoshal, 1998; Nahapiet and Ghoshal, 1998). Swap et al (2001) claim that mentoring and storytelling are an effective ways for enabling sharing and transferring of knowledge and informal ways of learning. Brink (2001) explained that there are three conditions that help in enabling knowledge sharing. These are social conditions, organizational conditions and technological conditions (for more information see Brink, 2001). Wellman et al., (2001) suggest that internet technologies help in increasing knowledge sharing. Technology can support the two approaches of knowledge sharing; codification and storage (repositories) and interpersonal exchange. Brink (2001) suggests that sharing explicit knowledge can be supported by knowledge repositories, sharing explicit and tacit knowledge can be supported by knowledge route map and sharing tacit knowledge can be supported by using a collaboration platform. Knowledge repository, knowledge route map, collaboration platform are described by Brink (2001, pp4-5) as follows:

The Barriers to knowledge sharing/transfer are the opposite of the enablers (Lilleoere and Hansen, 2011). The misfit between technology and task or between technology and the type of knowledge that needs to be shared can be a barrier to knowledge sharing/transfer. Another barrier to knowledge sharing/transfer is not providing the motivational and conducive factors that support knowledge sharing (which have been discussed in the enablers for knowledge sharing/transfer).

An additional barrier to knowledge sharing and transfer is when knowledge is sticky (Szulanski, 1996; 2000; Von Hippel, 1994). The transfer of knowledge is not a simple process. Szulanski (2000, p. 23) states "Even though intra-firm transfers of knowledge are often laborious, time consuming, and difficult, current conceptions continue to treat them as costless and instantaneous". The stickiness of knowledge may be defined in relation to costs. It can be defined as the "incremental expenditure required to transfer [a] unit of information to a specified locus in a form usable by a given information seeker. When this cost is low, information stickiness is low; when it is high, stickiness is high" (Von Hippel, 1994; p. 430).

Szulanski (1996; 2000) has identified several "origins of stickiness" or barriers to the transfer and sharing of knowledge. These are four factors: characteristics of the knowledge

transferred, of the source, of the recipient, and of the context in which the transfer takes place. Barriers related to characteristics of the knowledge transferred are (1) causal ambiguity and (2) un-proven-ness (Knowledge with a proven record of past usefulness is less difficult to transfer). Barriers related to the source: (1) lack of motivation, (2) not perceived as reliable. Barriers related to the recipient are: (1) lack of motivation; (2) lack of absorptive capacity (“Recipients might be unable to exploit outside sources of knowledge; that is, they may lack absorptive capacity. Such capacity is largely a function of their preexisting stock of knowledge and it becomes manifest in their ability to value, assimilate and apply new knowledge successfully to commercial ends”); (3) lack of retention capacity (A transfer of knowledge is effective only when the knowledge transferred is retained). Barriers related to the last factor, the context in which the transfer takes place, are: (1) barren organizational context and (2) Arduous relationship.

Szulanski (1996, 2000) found that these factors vary in importance over the stages of the transfer process. The transfer stages are: initiation stage, implementation stage, ramp-up stage (“The ramp-up stage offers a relatively brief window of opportunity to rectify unexpected problems where the recipient is likely to begin using new knowledge ineffectively, ramping-up gradually toward a satisfactory level of performance, often with external assistance” Szulanski, (2000; p 15) and the last transfer stage is integration stage.

“Knowledge transfer should be regarded as a process of reconstruction rather than a mere act of transmission and reception” (Szulanski, 2000; p 23).

### **3- RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The main aim of this paper is to explore how international hotel companies manage and utilise the knowledge of their employees who are geographically scattered all over the world. Creswell (2003, p 30) states “one of the chief reasons for conducting a qualitative study is that the study is exploratory”. Therefore, the qualitative research approach was selected in this study. Furthermore, a case study strategy was used, in general, case studies are the preferred strategy when how or why questions are being posed, when the investigator has little control over events, and when the focus is on a contemporary phenomenon within some real-life context (Yin, 2009). All previously mentioned conditions apply to this study, hence, the exploratory case study approach was selected for this study.

Data were collected from various sources within and outside Accor Company. It is suggested by (Yin, 2009) that evidence for case studies may come from six sources: documents, archival records, interviews, direct observation, participant observation, and physical artifacts. However, with respect to the interpretive exploratory case studies and the researcher’s role as an outside observer, it can be argued that interviews are the primary source of data in this study (Corbin and Strauss, 2008). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with ten employees in Accor UK. One of them was a telephone interview with one of the top human resources managers in Accor head office in London. The other nine interviews were with Accor employees in several hotels (Sofitel, Novotel and Ibis). In addition to that data were collected from Accor company official website and company’s published annual reports.

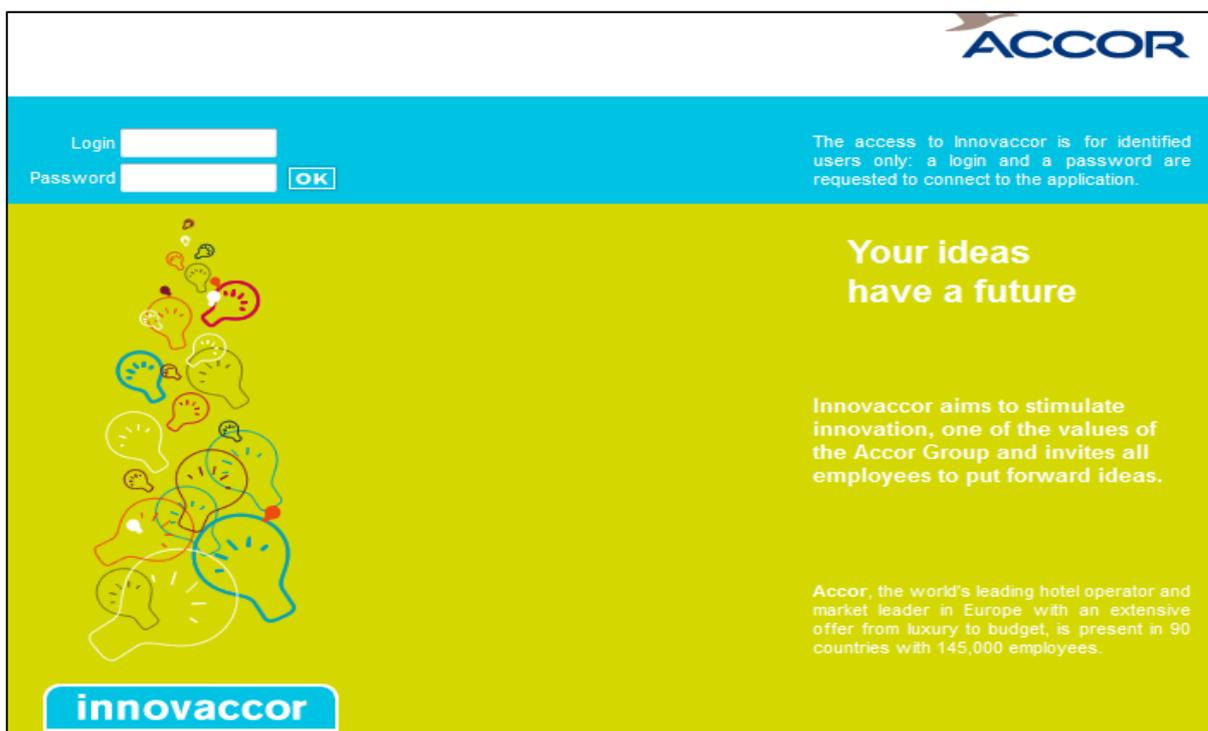
Exploratory internet data search can be used to describe information-seeking processes that are opportunistic, iterative, and multi-tactical. Exploratory search of the internet is commonly used in scientific discovery, learning, and decision-making contexts (Marchionini, 2006).

Exploratory search or searching to learn and build understanding is described by Marchionini, (2006) as increasingly viable as more primary materials go online. Learning searches involve multiple iterations and return sets of objects (graphs, or maps, texts, videos, presentations) that require the researcher to spend time scanning/viewing, comparing, and making qualitative judgments. Learning here is used in its general sense of developing new knowledge through cognitive processing and interpretation by the researcher and thus, includes sense-making through self-directed learning by the researcher. The internet search for Innov@ccor started from 2005 and continued until the writing of this paper.

Evidences collected from the internet were validated by interviewees to assure its authenticity. Also, there are two other sources found to provide information about Innov@ccor. The first is Sutthijakra (2012) and the second is Hawela et al., (2013), both helped in providing validation to the collected data. In the next part we will highlight the findings from the collected data.

#### **4- FINDINGS**

Innov@ccor was developed by the corporate human resource department in Paris and was launched at the end of the year 2001 beginning of 2002. Innov@ccor is a project aimed at promoting innovation among the Accor Group's employees. It takes the form of an Intranet tool that enables Accor employees to suggest ideas to improve the operation of their own hotel or department. Nearly 30,000 employees from all continents at that time participated in the project. The second international Innov@ccor (the people in charge of establishing Innov@ccor) meeting was held at the Académie Accor and was attended by Innov@ccor managers from all countries and businesses where the program is already established. At that time (2003) there were 11,000 proposed ideas and 3,844 have been implemented. This means that 35% of the proposed ideas have been utilized by the company. In the year 2011 Accor Company reported the implementation of 2,000 ideas during that year.



Innov@ccor is an online tool that enables

Staff: to propose ideas and to demonstrate creativity and take initiatives.

Managers:

- to organize challenges and problems in order to involve staff in dealing with challenges and resolving problems,
- to become aware of best practices and to apply them within their organization.

All employees can present their ideas either by going to innov@ccor online or by filling in a paper based form; then the idea is reviewed by the hotel general manager or innovactor (the person who is in charge of innovaccor in a specific hotel). The idea is evaluated according to its originality, impact and ease of implementation. If the idea is refused, a full explanation is provided to the employee who suggested it. If the idea is accepted, it will be rated according to a rating system of 1 bulb to 4 bulbs. This rating system works as follows: 1 bulb = 1 to 5 points; 2 bulbs = 6 to 15 points; 3 bulbs = 16 to 30 points; 4 bulbs = 31 to 60 points. When the hotel general manager accepts the idea, s/he implements it and reward the employee who suggested it. If the idea can benefit more than one hotel, then the hotel general manager will suggest it to be added to the best practice database.

A few examples of simple and efficient ideas those were suggested and implemented:

***Simple Ideas that are having a commercial impact:***

- Novotel Melbourne St Kilda makes forms available to all team members in order to record information on the preferences of regular guests (reading, football club, drinks, sport, etc.). This information is then collected by the Customer Relations Manager and recorded in the hotel's database. In this manner, the team becomes more aware of the habits of regular guests, who are delighted to find a personal welcome in their bedroom, rather than a standard complimentary gift.
- How to create the surprise for accor's guests? Mercure Hotels in Portugal created a database indicating the birthdays of their guests. Then, a special "Mercure Portugal" birthday card was printed and sent to guests on their birthday.
- How to boost sales of the Accor Favorite Guest Card? Ibis in Germany prints a sales slogan on all customer bills explaining the advantages of the card. For example: "Using an AFGC, you would have saved 10% on the total amount of your bill! Please enquire with reception for further information."
- Novotel Lyon Nord systematically sends an SMS to clients having made a booking to remind them of their reservation or of the automatic cancellation of their room at 6 p.m. In this manner, all bookings are confirmed by 6 p.m. Customers feel reassured. This quick and modern process has considerably reduced the number of "no shows" and enables easier management of "overbooking".

***Simple Ideas that makes a difference for guests:***

- It is quite common for guests to leave their spectacles at home; hence they have difficulty in reading the menu. Swiss hotels propose a range of spectacles / magnifying glasses for use by their guests.
- Guests quite often need practical information, such as the nearest cash dispenser, the opening hours of different shops, etc. Ibis Portsmouth has created a map of such information, which can be copied whenever a customer needs such information.
- The front office team at Novotel Birmingham Centre automatically ask guests when checking in whether they need a taxi for the following morning. In this manner, the guest does not have to wait for his taxi and can leave on time without feeling frustrated!
- In addition to their usual luggage, many guests arrive with their clothes on a hanger. This is quite problematic during check-in procedures since they have nowhere to temporarily hang their clothes. Ibis Berlin Dreilinden has found a solution: hooks are discretely placed near to the reception desk.
- Ibis Den Haag Centre proposes bedrooms for disabled persons. Nevertheless, staff are not familiar with the facilities in these rooms. The solution: create an information sheet with photos, mentioning all the details. Hence, when a customer calls to book a room asking, for example, whether a wheelchair can pass through the door, the receptionist can respond precisely and immediately.

***Simple Ideas that make a difference to staff's daily routine:***

- How to prevent wall plugs from being ripped out by the vacuum cleaners in the bedroom corridors? Ibis Lourdes has found the solution: a mini-extension lead measuring approximately forty centimetres has been fitted onto the plug of each vacuum-cleaner. When the main lead of the cleaner becomes caught, rather than ripping out the wall plug, the mini lead becomes unplugged instead.
- The distribution of bedrooms for housekeepers was rather time-consuming and in the end was not always very clear. Ibis Paris Versailles Parly II created an Excel table that has resolved the problem: before, it took at least 20 minutes to work out the room allocation when the hotel was full. By using this document, less than 5 minutes are now needed!
- How to facilitate the use of the right products for cleaning the bedrooms in Ibis, while ensuring optimum hygiene? By using a cloth that is the same colour as the cleaning product.
- The new Novotel bedrooms have a complimentary tray providing a kettle for making a cup of tea or coffee in the room, in addition to a selection of welcome products. In order to sort out the various products more easily on the trolley, Corinne Julien from Novotel Caen Côte de Nacre invented and manufactured a wooden compartment box which can be fixed onto the Novotel trolley. This box enables the housekeeper to properly sort out the welcome products on the trolley and to protect their packaging.

## **5- Analysis and Recommendations**

The SECI model and knowledge management processes discussed earlier will be used to analyse the finding and for providing recommendations.

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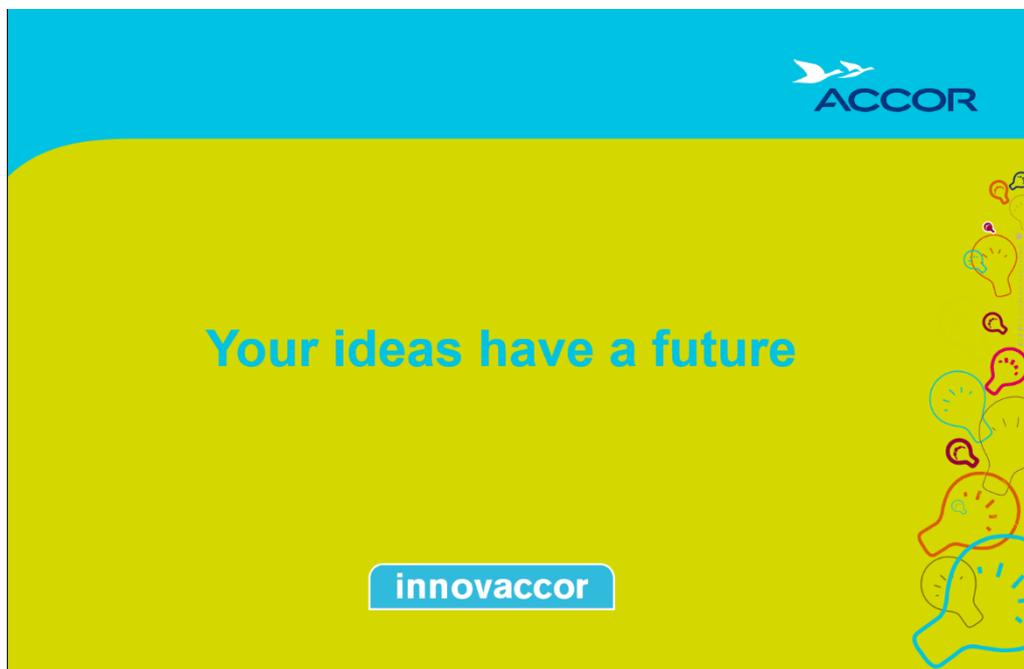
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Appendix 1: Examples of Data collected from Accor Company and Validated by interviewees



# How to submit an idea?

innovaccor

## The idea must be recorded on Innovaccor

The idea is first presented on an "Idea Form"

an Idea Form enables to introduce and detail the idea with the Manager or the Innovactor. It is then recorded in the Innovaccor base.

or  
The idea is directly registered in Innovaccor

2 access:

[www.innovaccor.com](http://www.innovaccor.com)

Intraccor > Vivre Accor -> innovaccor

