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Simulation games are the future of sustainable hospitality training

Operational Efficiency

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Synopsis
Tim Rogmans discusses the role of simulations in enhancing sustainability management skills in the hospitality sector, bridging the gap between theoretical learning and practical application. Traditional methods, like classroom learning and on-the-job training, fall short in effectively teaching sustainability concepts, which often seem abstract and removed from hotel operations. Simulations provide a dynamic and engaging way for learners to make decisions as decision-makers in a virtual environment, receiving immediate feedback on their actions. This method has been successful in developing basic management skills and is now seen as a potent tool for teaching sustainability. The article suggests considering various factors while choosing simulations, such as the decision-maker's role, the scope of the simulation, its length, complexity, and customization options.

Compared to other business disciplines, management training for the hospitality sector is practical in nature. The world's top schools emphasize the acquisition of hands-on hospitality skills in areas such as food, customer service, construction, and accounting. Not surprisingly, on-the-job training is a large component at many leading schools, enabling students to gain real-world experience that is relevant to their future careers.

When it comes to developing the sustainability management skills that are fast becoming essential for today's hospitality managers, both the traditional classroom and practical work experience are suboptimal learning methods. In the classroom, textbooks, lectures and videos are often experienced as dry and theoretical. Concepts such as greenhouse gases, emission factors, scope 3 emissions and net-zero appear abstract and far removed from the operational reality of hotels. At the same time, it is challenging to make on-the-job sustainability training a meaningful exercise. Unlike in operational roles, the impact of sustainability initiatives can take time to materialize and is difficult to observe.

Simulation games offer the potential to bridge this gap between theory and practice. Although the adoption of simulations in management education has been increasing, there are still many instructors who have not yet used them in class. This article provides an overview of the use of simulations in hospitality education and training, and gives guidelines on how to get started.

SIMULATION GAMES IN HOSPITALITY EDUCATION

Online management simulation games ('simulations' in short), provide a solution in the search for an effective way to develop sustainability skills in the hospitality industry that is both robust and engaging. With simulations, learners play the role of a decision maker in a fictional entity (for example, a hotel), make decisions in a complex and evolving setting, and receive real-time feedback on their performance. If deployed properly, the decisions that students make in a simulation are designed to practice skills that are in line with the learning objectives of a course. Students apply the theory they have learned in class and see the results of their decisions in a condensed time period, based on parameters in an underlying simulation model. In this way, simulations provide a safe and effective bridge between theory and practice.

Simulations have been used for some time in hospitality training to develop basic management skills, such as business planning, marketing, human resources and revenue optimization. Provided that instructors plan the use of a simulation in a thoughtful way (see here for an article on what this entails), the result tends to be more engaged students, improved learning outcomes and greater confidence in the workplace after graduation. As instructors and students have become familiar with the use of simulations in general hospitality management education, there is now great potential to expand their use in the development of sustainability skills.

SIMULATIONS IN SUSTAINABILITY EDUCATION

Sustainability challenges are to a large extent about how systems operate (such as greenhouse gas emissions in the atmosphere or diversity of species on the planet) and simulations provide great potential for teaching about systems. In a simulation, as students are presented with information on how a system operates (a 'theory'), they can make decisions and take action in order to reach desirable results in a gamified setting.

When planning the use of simulations in sustainable hospitality education, it is worthwhile to consider the types of simulations that are available to ensure that the selected simulation matches the learning goals of a course. Below are several ways of classifying simulations that need to be taken into account in the selection process.

***Who is the decision maker*:** In sustainability simulations, the decision maker represents either an individual consumer (making decisions on behavior and purchasing), a company (making the company sustainable) or a policymaker (setting policy). For hospitality management students, simulations in which decisions are made on behalf of a company (for example, a hotel) are likely to be the most relevant. The company should be one that students can easily relate to, for example in terms of its activities and location.

What is the scope of the simulation: In management education, sustainability can be defined on a spectrum from narrow to broad. Some courses and simulations will deal specifically with climate change, including the actions that companies can take to reduce emissions and mitigate the effects of climate change on their business (see here for an example). Alternatively, sustainability may be defined broadly and encompass all of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) or a variety of Environment Social and Governance (ESG) factors (see here for information on the Net Positive Hospitality simulation from the Sustainable Hospitality Alliance). One way of defining sustainability is not necessarily better than another, but instructors need to ensure alignment between the contents of a simulation and the learning goals of the exercise.

Length: Simulations are of varying durations, ranging from 30 minutes to up to 10 hours. Longer simulations are used over several class periods and end up becoming a central part of the course, while short simulations are used to hone more specific skills. In practice, simulations that take about an hour to play are still able to provide a holistic and rich experience to learners.

Complexity and customization: Simulations need have a level of complexity that is appropriate for the target audience. If a simulation is too simple, students will conclude that the setting is not realistic and get bored. If it is too complex, they will become confused and get lost. In both cases, little learning takes place. Fortunately, there are many ways to tailor the use of a simulation to specific audiences, either by using customization options that are available as part of the instructor settings or by briefing students to use the simulation in a particular way. Customization options can involve the inclusion or exclusion of particular game objectives (e.g. staying within a carbon budget) and results (e.g. cumulative emissions vs. the carbon budget). Other ways to customize are the inclusion of unexpected events during the simulation or the tailoring of model parameters.

Although one type if simulation is not better than in another in an absolute sense, understanding the characteristics of simulations and ensuring that they are aligned with the course learning objectives, is a critical step in ensuring success.

SIMULATIONS FOR PROFESSIONAL TRAINING

Whereas in an educational setting the emphasis is on understanding course concepts by applying them, in professional training there are additional benefits. Typically, professionals are even less inclined than students to sit through lectures and memorize materials and simulations are a great way to bring sustainable hospitality to life for them. In addition, sustainability simulations can be effective tools for change management and business planning. With simulations, professionals develop not only the knowledge, but also the confidence and enthusiasm to improve their hotel's sustainability performance. By discussing the choices that are presented to them with colleagues, learners start generating options and plans that can work for their company and generate the willingness to take the required action. In short, for professionals a simulation can serve as a tool for training, change management and planning at the same time.

CONCLUSION

Although educators and trainers are generally enthusiastic about the idea of experiential learning methods such as simulations, many are still reluctant to get started with them. The advent of online facilitated training, the increase in availability of high-quality sustainable hospitality simulations and the urgency of the world's sustainability challenges make it possible and necessary to adopt simulations at scale in hospitality education and training.

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Dr. Tim Rogmans is Managing Director of Sim Institute, a company that designs and develops simulation games in sustainability and other management disciplines. He is the author of the award-winning Sustainability Management Simulation: Net Zero and partnered with the Sustainable Hospitality Alliance on the development of the Net Positive Hospitality simulation. Tim is a faculty advisor for Harvard Business publishing and writes frequently on the effective use of simulations in business education.

Sim Institute — siminstitute.com
Sim Institute is a global leader in the design and development of simulation games for sustainability and management education.