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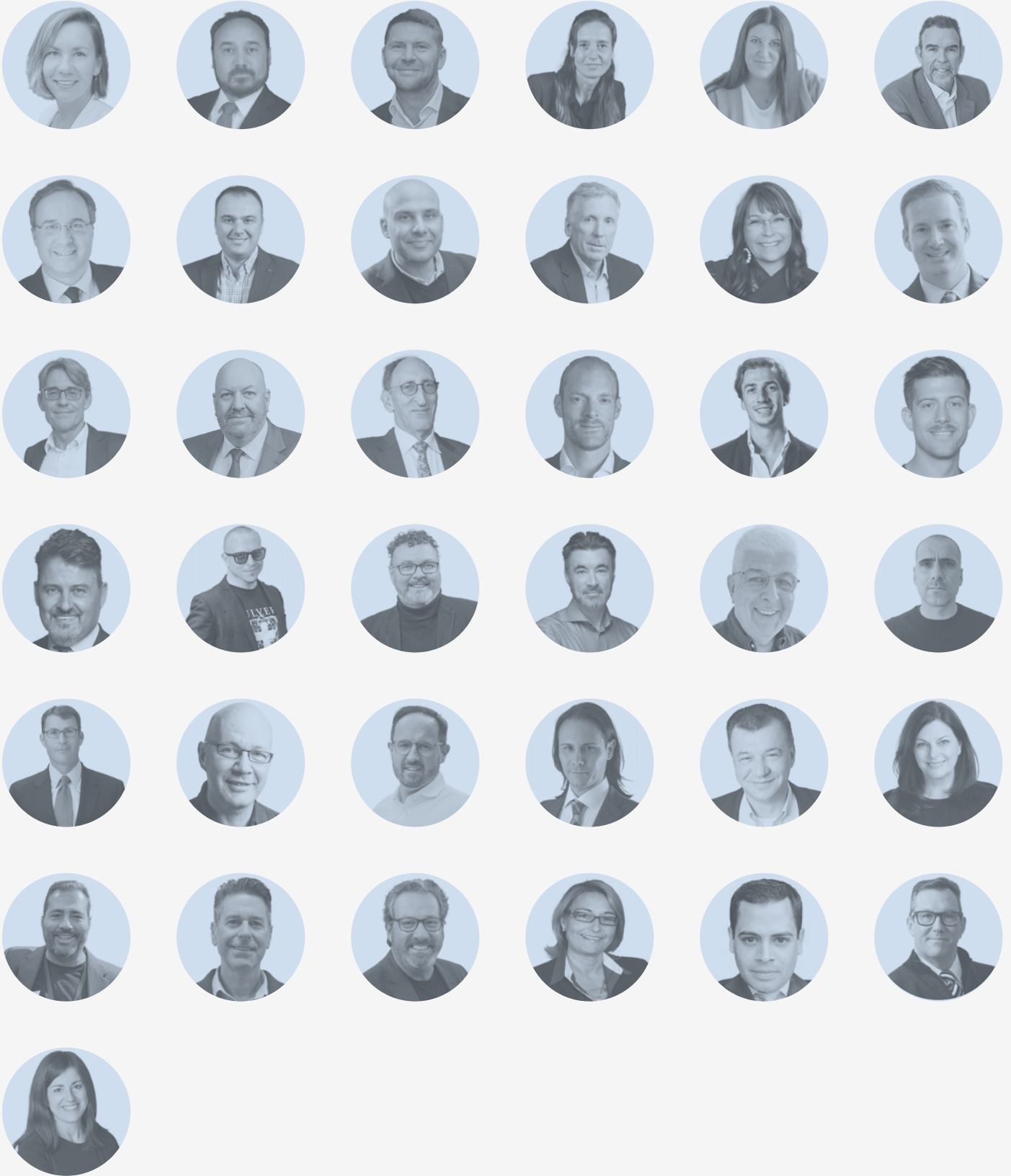
Technology Mindset

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EHL

As the hospitality industry stands at a crossroads between tradition and innovation, Ian Millar—Senior Lecturer in Entrepreneurship and Innovation at EHL and a leading authority in hospitality technology—invites readers to rethink long-held assumptions about the guest experience. Drawing on his dual expertise in hospitality and information technology, as well as his experience advising hotels and technology startups worldwide, Millar explores how a technology mindset is not only compatible with great service, but essential for meeting the evolving expectations of guests in 2025 and beyond.

"*Hospitality is a people business.*" This has been the mantra of the hospitality industry since the dawn of time. I am not suggesting that we replace the human element in hospitality, but we do need to drastically rethink what makes sense in 2025 and beyond.

In this short article, I kindly ask the reader to challenge themselves and truly consider: does what we are doing still make sense? There are many areas where rethinking our approach is necessary, but for the purposes of this article, I will focus on just a few. The first is "*automation.*" This topic was recently discussed in my class with master's students, most of whom are working professionals in the industry. Once we sat down and started to answer a simple question, it was incredible how many examples emerged. The question was: "*What could be automated or handled by the hotel guest themselves?*"

The most obvious example is hotel check-in and check-out. To anyone who says this is an essential part of the customer experience, I would argue otherwise. Check-in is a transaction that, in its current form, should not happen. Consider the airline industry. I imagine most readers have flown and used an airline app in the process—even in business class. You book your seat, check yourself in, choose your seat, and so on.

Now, imagine the airline took that away and you had to return to the old way: arriving at the airport three hours early, waiting in long queues at the check-in counter, and only learning your seat assignment at the counter. Why don't we offer this same *choice* to hotel guests? For those who want it, let them have it.

It is not detrimental to your hotel to give guests the choices they want. On the contrary, it improves how they perceive you. So, would it really be wrong to see a check-in kiosk in a 5-star hotel? To me, it would not. You give the choice to guests who want to use it. Guest interaction during the stay, which has traditionally been dominated by the concierge and phone calls, is and should be moving to a text-based option—but again, only for those guests who want that choice. With improvements in AI, especially in language nuances, the next step after simple text will be native conversations with AI agents in your own language. We are not far from this at all.

Some might say this is too much technology and could confuse guests. I would say it is not—if done correctly. If processes are communicated clearly and staff understand them, it will not remove staff from their jobs; it will free them from cumbersome manual processes we have always done. For the guest, it needs to be the "*WhatsApp experience*": seamless and frictionless. Ask yourself, "*How many hours of training did you need to learn how to use WhatsApp?*" The answer is probably zero.

That is the same mindset you should take when it comes to the guest technology experience.

The above are just a couple of examples where technology choice matters. Maybe, when you have a minute, sit down (ideally with your staff) and think about what could be automated without any negative impact on the customer experience. I bet you can think of many things. As the industry struggles to find frontline staff, especially in rooms division and F&B, is this not the perfect time to start addressing these issues?

But for this to happen, we need new leadership skills as well. We need more "*technology mindset*" people at the decision-making table. The role of the IT director must move beyond simply keeping the servers running to a place of leadership, where technological knowledge underpins company strategy. If your hotel has a board of directors or advisors, go and count how many technology people are there. If the answer is zero, you know what to do.

Now, you may be asking about the cost associated with all this technology. I would respond: what is the cost if you do not keep up with customer expectations? The world is changing fast; you can't afford to be left behind. And if you're thinking, "I can't afford this," I kindly ask you to calculate how much you spend putting chocolates on pillows over a year.

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