



ĐẠI HỌC THÁI NGUYÊN
THAINGUYEN UNIVERSITY

ISSN 1859 - 2171

TẠP CHÍ
KHOA HỌC
CÔNG NGHỆ
JOURNAL OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

CHUYÊN SAN KHOA HỌC XÃ HỘI - NHÂN VĂN - KINH TẾ
SOCIAL SCIENCES - HUMANITIES - ECONOMICS

Tập 175, số 15, 2017

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BARRIERS TO ASEAN GREEN HOTEL STANDARD IN THE HOTEL INDUSTRY: A CASE STUDY IN HA NOI

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SUMMARY

In a wave for sustainable tourism development towards environment protection, a plenty of ASEAN hotels have implemented Environmental management system (EMS) or ASEAN green hotel standard (AGHS). Yet, the application of AGHS is still limited in hotels in Vietnam as well as in Hanoi. This exploratory study was conducted to identify the barriers to AGHS in the hotel industry in Hanoi. A qualitative study was carried out via in-depth interviews with 5 hotels certified with this certificate and other 5 hotels that have not been certified yet. These hotels are located in Hanoi. Seven barriers were identified that hinder hotels certified with ASEAN green hotel certificate along with two barriers preventing not-yet-certified hotels applying the standard. Implications of the findings were discussed, while recommendations were made to reduce the barriers inhibiting the adoption of AGHS in the hotel industry in Hanoi.

Key words: *ASEAN green hotel standard; barriers; environmental management system; hotel industry; sustainable development.*

INTRODUCTION

The hotel sector in Vietnam becomes increasingly environmentally friendly. Reported in a survey on the responsibility of accommodation business services in Vietnam by Grant Thornton Vietnam (2013) [1] for 3-5 domestic star hotels, 55% of hotels has major changes in the awareness of environmental and social issues in the last 3 years while 82% of hotels has environmental plans and 65% strongly taking measures to improve energy efficiency and reduce waste and pollution. This trend is to meet an increasing demand for sustainable development [2], which requires hospitality providers, huge consumers of natural resources for operation, to be responsible for serious environmental influences brought by their operation [3]. Hence, to promote business development with less damaging the environment, hotels are encouraged to go green by adopting environmental tools such as codes of conduct, best environment practices, ecolables, environmental management systems (EMSs), environment performance indicators

[4]. These tools are among the most popular in the world as well as in Vietnam.

Established in 2006, AGHS has the participation of ten countries including Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam for improving the quality of ASEAN tourism towards green operations. The aim of the standard is building ASEAN into a high-quality tourism destination called “*A Quality Single Destination*”. Hence, it is a basis for self-assessment and guidelines for hospitality establishments while helping consult business owners and those working in the field of tourism to reach ASEAN quality standards and regulations on tourism products. The guideline consists of 11 sections including environmental management plans, green procurement, human resource management and environmental management activities. The criteria for evaluation are divided into 11 groups, 30 sections and 80 specific criteria. Hotels can use it as a basis for self-assessment and guidelines to become environmentally friendly and adopt energy conservation measures.

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The implementation of environmental practices in hotels receives increasingly criticism. Firstly, the adoption of formal EMS standards or certifications is just to meet stakeholders' pressure [5], [6], [7]. As a result, EMS practices in some hotels are dictated by what some EMS certification schemes, awards or labels have identified as the norm, not for reducing environmental impacts. Secondly, rather than sustainable development targets, this application is mostly driven by financial considerations or a focus on specific outcomes such as material and energy efficiency and still limited to a firm level [8], [9]. Thus, the adoption of specific sustainable practices is criticised for being ad hoc instead of linking with the overall business strategy [3], even though some of the world's leading hotel chains have started to report on more comprehensive sustainability programmes. This perspective raises a need to have further studies on barriers hotels might face in the application of EMS or eco-labels [10].

Arguably, there are limited researches on barriers to the adoption of EMS and eco-labels in the hotel industry [11]. Most of the existing studies focus primarily on the motivation factors driving hotels to adopt EMS or eco-labels. As such, well identified motivations to adopt EMS are operating cost [10], [12], competitive advantage, complying with state regulations on environmental protection [10] and customer demand along with employee loyalty promotion [13]. Yet, these studies are highly general and do not clearly specify issues each types of hotels might face when using EMS, hence, there needs further studies [10]. Recently, the application of EMS and eco-labels in Vietnam has also been of interest. One paper by Hoang [14] introduced pros and cons along with solutions to apply AGHS for hotels in Hanoi. However, no difficulties faced by these hotels were mentioned. Another study by Nguyen [15] on AGHS and Golden Lotus Label applied in Vietnam, despite pointing out the benefits and

significance of this application, did not study real process situations. Studying the practical application of ASEAN Green hotel certificates at one specific hotel, Dao [16] compared the standard criteria with the hotel's practices to indicate the applicability of this standard at one location. Nevertheless, the limited scope of the study cannot represent the difficulties other hotels might deal with generally. Therefore, this study is conducted to determine the barriers of green hotels in Hanoi, Vietnam at different hotel categories. The findings will bring more information of green operation barriers in the hotel industry especially in Vietnam. Hotels and green hoteliers in Vietnam can then find solutions for the barriers.

THE IDENTIFICATION OF BARRIERS TO ADOPT ENVIRONMENTAL PRACTICES

Environmental practices are well recognized in the hotel industry worldwide, but for various reasons, many hotels are unwilling to adopt [11]. As a result, there are a few studies on barriers to EMS implementation in the hotel industry [11], [17], [18]. Of which, a main study by Chan (2008) [19] point out six barriers to EMS adoption in hotels. These are a shortage of knowledge and skills, a limit on professional advice, uncertainty of outcome, lack of certifiers, lack of resources, implementation and maintenance costs. Another crucial study by Kamalulariffin et al. [20] identifies five barriers including regulation and government, customer demand, level of competition, greenest at the organization level and attitude toward change. Further research by Vikneswaran Nair et al. [21] indicate nine barriers, which are high maintenance and implementation cost, lack of sufficient knowledge on green, lack of resources (time, manpower, equipment and money), lack of momentum from the hotel industry owners, lack of a sense of urgency and ambiguity of environmental guidelines, lack of qualified verifiers or consultants, conflicting guidance, lack of government regulations and enforcement, difficult in operating a green hotel.

The authors adopted 12 pertinent barriers based on these three primary studies as follows:

- (1) High implementation cost
- (2) High maintenance cost
- (3) Lack of green information and knowledge
- (4) Lack of green experts
- (5) Uncertainty of outcome
- (6) Lack of resources such as manpower and equipment
- (7) Lack of support from owner and management
- (8) Difficulty in balancing the quality of service with environmental performance
- (9) Difficulty in managing and training staffs
- (10) Lack of networking with green suppliers
- (11) Lack of government regulation and enforcement
- (12) Lack of consumer supports

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Qualitative method was used in this study through in-depth interviews allowing probing questions related to 12 barriers identified in the review. The authors contacted by phone and email to introduce the interview content then set interview schedules with 10 hotels in Hanoi area (including 5 hotels recognized as ASEAN Green Hotel and 5 hotels which have not been recognized as ASEAN Green Hotel). Five hotels recognized as ASEAN Green Hotel were certificated by ASEAN council from 2008 to 2016. Five hotels which have not been recognized as ASEAN Green Hotel was conveniently chosen. The details of hotels participated in this study are presented in Table 1.

Data collection was done in two phases. In Phase 1, the authors focused on collecting secondary data through articles and papers related to the research theme to find out all possible barriers. In Phase 2, primary data was collected through interviews with five hotels certified as ASEAN green hotels and five hotels that were not certified as ASEAN green hotels in Hanoi.

After being collected, the data was processed in two directions. For groups of hotels receiving ASEAN green hotel certification; it was to find out barriers in applying AGHS. The causes of the remaining hotel groups not applying AGHS was also pointed out in the second step.

Table 1. *Hotels' information*

No.	Name of hotel	Ranking	Interviewee
Five ASEAN green hotels			
1	Daewoo Hanoi	5-star	Chief Engineer
2	Sheraton Hanoi	5-star	Chief Engineer Housekeeping Executive
3	Intercontinental Hanoi Westlake	5-star	Sales and Marketing Director
4	Pan Pacific (Sofitel Plaza Hanoi)	5-star	Hotel Quality Manager
5	La Casa (Prestige)	5-star	Chief Engineer
Fivenot-ASEAN green hotels			
6	Thang Loi	4-star	Administration & Personnel Department Magager
7	Vietnam Trade Union	3-star	Housekeeping Assistant
8	Sahul Hanoi	4-star	General Manager
9	Kim Lien Hanoi	3-star	Housekeeping Manager
10	Hilton Opera	5-star	Sales Manager

RESEARCH RESULTS

For the hotels certified by AGHS

The results found that, the hotels certified by AGHS have faced seven barriers to adopt the standard. These are (1) high implementation cost, (2) high maintenance cost, (5) uncertainty of outcome when applying the standard, (7) lack

of support from owner and management, (8) difficulties in balancing service quality and environmental performance, (9) difficulty in managing and training staffs and (11) lack of government regulation and enforcement.

Of which, high implementation cost is the first barrier identified. In order to save energy, and water during the operation, the hotels have to replace many items with environmentally friendly equipments such as thermal resistance glass, LED power saving, low flow shower equipment, etc. These equipments also require high maintenance costs, which is the second barrier. Also, the uncertainty of outcome is the next barrier for hotels, which leads to a difficulty in getting support from the owners and management board of the hotels.

In addition, the application of AGHS in the hotels has not received positive support from the government. At present, the government only instructs the hotels to carry out environmental protection activities to make their applications certified towards AGHS. Balancing service quality and environmental performance is considered a difficult problem for hotels. Finally, the management and training of staff in the hotel to fully meet the criteria of ASEAN standards is also a challenge, notably for private hotels.

Pointed out in the study, hotels certified with ASEAN green hotel in Hanoi have not faced with barriers 3,4,6,10,12. Specifically, the hotels have no problem with green information and knowledge because most of them have applied ISO 14000 and have green experts (e.g. a quality manager or technical director). Besides, most of their guests are willing to support energy and water saving during their stay. On the other hand, the hotels certified by this standard have high rankings, hence their staffs are equipped with appropriate knowledge and skills to apply the standards.

For the hotels has not been certified by AGHS

It is found that, beside small and medium sized (SME) hotels, many large sized and high ranked hotels do not apply AGHS. A such, the small sized hotels do not apply this standard as lacking information of the standard (corresponding to the third barrier out of 12 barriers mentioned above).

Meanwhile, the large sized and high ranked hotels see do not need to implement AGHS. A main reason is that, they have their own environmental protection program belonging to their cooperation such as South East Asia or ISO 9000, ISO 14000 applied mostly in 4-5 star hotels. ISO 14000 standard covers the criteria of the AGHS.

AGHS consist of criteria set by the Council of ASEAN countries for the 3-5 star ranked hotels of member countries to promote green operation. However, the number of hotels certified by AGHS in each member country is limited by the Council of ASEAN nations (ten hotels for each member every year). In fact, many hotels have good environmental practices but are not certified by this standard. Whereas, the number of hotels certified by other standards such as ISO 14000 is not limited as long as it meets the requirements of the standard. In addition, the adoption of the AGHS has faced with the above barriers. Therefore, only five hotels in Hanoi were certified by this standard from 2008 to 2016.

The barriers that ASEAN green hotels have faced are specific, preventing them from well implementing the standards. Meanwhile, the barriers that non-ASEAN green hotels have faced are perspective barriers. To remove those barriers, some recommendations will be proposed as bellow.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Hint from the findings, the following recommendations are suggested in order to encourage more application of AGHS in Hanoi:

Firstly, tourism management agencies should strengthen the education and propaganda of this standard by introducing more specific implementation guidelines and benefit of standard so that hotels can have enough information of the application. This helps hotels have information of the standard.

In addition, in order for this standard to be more widely disseminated, the content of sustainable tourism development and criteria of AGHS should be introduced in universities or training courses to raise the awareness of sustainable tourism development and environmental protection. As a result, it will be less difficult for hotels to re-train their staffs to implement the hotel's regulations on environmental protection and sustainable development. This also help hotels certain outcome when applying the standard.

Secondly, hotel management levels should be aware of the role of environmental protection in general and the application of AGHS in particular, thus, they can have solutions to raise the awareness of staffs as well as guests staying at the hotel. These solutions should be included in the plans and concretized through training programs or activities to promote understandings about environmental protection, energy and water saving, waste handling, using environmentally friendly products.

Thirdly, management agencies should give government regulation and enforcement on environment protection in general and in hotel industry in particular.

Fourthly, there should be further studies on the long-term economic viability of adopting AGHS or other green labels. State management agencies and training institutions should guide hotels, especially small and medium sized ones, for the cost-effectiveness and cost-effectiveness of implementing these standards. This will help hotels easily get support from their owners to apply this standard.

Fifthly, local authorities need to be proactive in bridging residential businesses with local communities in providing inputs as well as local labors for hotel.

Finally, the Council of ASEAN countries should increase the number of hotel to be certified by ASEAN green hotel standard in each country member every year.

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TÓM TẮT CÁC RÀO CẢN TRONG VIỆC ÁP DỤNG TIÊU CHUẨN KHÁCH SẠN XANH ASEAN TẠI HÀ NỘI

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Trong xu thế phát triển du lịch bền vững, thân thiện với môi trường, nhiều khách sạn trong khu vực ASEAN đã áp dụng hệ thống quản lý môi trường hay tiêu chuẩn khách sạn xanh ASEAN. Tuy nhiên, chưa có nhiều khách sạn áp dụng tiêu chuẩn khách sạn xanh ASEAN ở Việt Nam nói chung và ở Hà Nội nói riêng. Nghiên cứu khám phá này được thực hiện để xác định các rào cản trong việc áp dụng tiêu chuẩn khách sạn xanh ASEAN. Nghiên cứu định tính thông qua phỏng vấn sâu 10 khách sạn, nghiên cứu đã chỉ ra 7 nhân tố là rào cản trong việc áp dụng tiêu chuẩn khách sạn xanh ASEAN đối với khách sạn đã được chứng nhận tiêu chuẩn này và hai rào cản đối với khách sạn chưa được chứng nhận. Do đó, nhóm tác giả đưa ra một số đề xuất nhằm giảm thiểu các rào cản trong việc áp dụng tiêu chuẩn khách sạn xanh ASEAN cho các khách sạn tại Hà Nội.

Từ khóa: tiêu chuẩn khách sạn xanh ASEAN; rào cản; hệ thống bảo vệ môi trường; ngành khách sạn; phát triển bền vững.

Ngày nhận bài: 13/11/2017; Ngày phản biện: 18/12/2017; Ngày duyệt đăng: 29/12/2017

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