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INTERVIEW

Synergies of scenario planning, innovation, and hospitality education: a dialogue with Ian Yeoman, Professor at the Hotel Management School Leeuwarden at NHL Stenden

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ABSTRACT: This edited transcript documents a dialogue between Rodney Westerlaken, Editor-in-Chief of *Research in Hospitality Management*, and Ian Yeoman, Professor of Disruption, Innovation and New Phenomena at NHL Stenden University of Applied Sciences. The conversation explores Professor Yeoman's extensive background, his pioneering work in scenario planning and research into the future of hospitality, tourism and leisure, and his current role in shaping the future of hospitality education and research. The discussion explores the disruptive forces transforming the hospitality and tourism industries, such as the impact of artificial intelligence, demographic shifts and climate change. Furthermore, it highlights the critical role of design-based education in fostering innovative problem-solving and preparing the next generation of hospitality leaders. The dialogue offers valuable insights into the synergies between academic inquiry, industry collaboration and the imperative to address emerging global challenges.

Introduction

In this perceptive dialogue, Rodney Westerlaken, Editor-in-Chief of *Research in Hospitality Management*, engages with Professor Ian Yeoman, a renowned expert in the field of disruption, innovation and new phenomena in the hospitality and tourism sectors. Professor Yeoman's unique career trajectory, spanning both industry and academia, provides a rich tapestry of experiences that inform his cutting-edge research and visionary perspective on the future of the hospitality industry. Conversing with Professor Yeoman is both energising and thought-provoking, akin to consulting a scientific wizard with a crystal ball for glimpses into the future.

Rodney Westerlaken (RW): Accompanying us today is Professor Ian Yeoman (IY), a prominent professor and futurist in the fields of hospitality, tourism and leisure. Could you please start by sharing a few key aspects about yourself?

Ian Yeoman (IY): My name is Ian Yeoman, and I am the Professor of Disruption, Innovation and New Phenomena at NHL Stenden University of Applied Sciences, specifically at the Hotel Management School. The word "disruption" in this title is particularly relevant, as we are currently in an era of convergence, where numerous trends are coming together to impact the future of hospitality and tourism significantly. Some of the key disruptive elements that I am exploring include artificial intelligence, demographic shifts and climate change. Artificial intelligence, for instance, is not a new concept, with its origins dating back to the 1960s and 1970s at institutions like MIT and Harvard in the USA. However, the emergence of user-friendly technologies, such as

virtual assistants and ChatGPT, is transforming how we search the internet and make decisions. Another disruptive trend is the rapidly ageing global population and declining birth rates. This demographic shift is leading to labour shortages and vacancies in the hospitality sector, which could potentially be addressed through automation and the introduction of humanoid robots in areas like food service and housekeeping.

Furthermore, climate change is proving to be a significant disruptor, with the anticipated temperature rise to 2.5 degrees Celsius having a profound impact, particularly on popular tourist destinations in the Mediterranean region.

Despite the challenges posed by these disruptive forces, the hospitality and tourism industries are known for their innovative spirit and entrepreneurial nature. This presents opportunities for new products, experiences and solutions to emerge, driven by the creativity and problem-solving skills of industry professionals and students.

RW: Your background is quite unique, as you have transitioned from a scenario planner at VisitScotland to becoming a professor. How did your practical experience influence your academic research, and what advantage does it provide you?
IY: My journey to becoming an academic researcher can be traced back to my early days as a student. I was dyslexic and not a top performer in school, but I found that I excelled at research and academic study. During my time at Sheffield City Polytechnic (now Sheffield Hallam University), where I completed my degree in Catering Systems, I discovered a passion for research and writing.

After graduation, I made the conscious decision to gain industry experience before pursuing further academic

qualifications. I worked for Trust House Forte for seven years, progressing from an assistant manager to a general manager and area manager. This hands-on experience in the hospitality industry provided me with a deep understanding of the sector, which I later leveraged in my academic career.

At the age of 30, I made the decision to pursue a PhD and enter the world of academia. I took a position at Napier University (now called Edinburgh Napier University), where I taught hospitality and tourism management, while also completing my doctoral research on decision-making processes in the hospitality and tourism industries.

The opportunity to apply my practical experience and industry knowledge to my academic work proved invaluable. My PhD evolved from an initial focus on hotel managers' decision-making to exploring how consultants in the hospitality and tourism industries use problem-solving and group techniques. This shift was influenced by my exposure to the work of Professor John Sparrow at the University of Central England (now Birmingham City University), an occupational psychologist who specialised in facilitation and problem-structuring methodologies.

My position at VisitScotland as the first scenario planner for the global tourism industry was a pivotal point in my career. During this time, I applied my expertise in scenario planning and systems thinking to help the organisation navigate the changing tourism landscape, including events such as the Iraq War and the threat of terrorism (Yeoman et al., 2005).

This practical experience in scenario planning and futures research laid the foundation for my subsequent work in New Zealand. I replicated similar projects with the Ministry of Tourism and the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment (Yeoman, 2012). The insights gained from these real-world applications further strengthened my academic research and publications.

Ultimately, the combination of my industry experience and academic pursuits has enabled me to develop a unique and well-rounded perspective on the hospitality and tourism sectors. This dual background has been instrumental in shaping my research agenda and informing my role as the Professor of Disruption, Innovation and New Phenomena at NHL Stenden University.

RW: Given your extensive experience in scenario planning and futures research, what do you see as the next big thing or potential disruptor on the horizon?
IY: I believe that many of the major disruptors we are facing are quite predictable. We are currently in a phase of transformation where significant changes are unfolding across various domains, from sustainability to the impact of technology.

In terms of sustainability, we cannot reverse the effects of climate change, and global temperatures are likely to rise by 2.5 degrees Celsius. This will have profound implications for tourism and hospitality, as destinations and food production systems will be impacted. Given these climatic changes, we need to start modelling what tourism and hospitality will look like in the year 2050.

Regarding technology, the key question is the degree to which labour will be substituted by automation and artificial intelligence. We are already seeing the decline of certain roles such as taxi drivers, airline pilots and bus drivers as more tasks become automated. Over the next 15 to 20 years, we can expect to see a more significant shift towards technological adoption and ubiquitous decision-making in the hospitality industry.

This raises fundamental questions about the future of hospitality management education. Do we need to rethink the very concept of hospitality as certain aspects become more commodified and automated? How do we prepare students for an industry where the role of the traditional hotel general manager may diminish due to increased automation and decision-making capabilities?

Another significant disruptor is the broader shift towards regionalisation and the potential decoupling of globalisation. The tensions between China and the West, as well as the rise of nationalism and protectionism, could have far-reaching consequences for the mobility of people and goods, which is at the core of the tourism industry.

Additionally, demographic changes such as the ageing population and declining living standards will impact the landscape of hospitality, particularly in areas like cruise tourism, which has traditionally catered to the "silver service market".

These disruptive trends underscore the need for proactive research and collaborative efforts to anticipate and address the transformative challenges facing the hospitality and tourism sectors. By embracing a future-oriented mindset and leveraging design-based education, we can empower students and industry professionals to navigate this rapidly evolving landscape.

RW: The COVID-19 pandemic was a major disruptor that you had previously envisioned in your research. What do you believe are the key lessons the hospitality and tourism industries have learned from this crisis?
IY: The COVID-19 pandemic was in many ways a dystopian scenario that we had anticipated in our research. In 2006, we published a paper on a scenario we called the "Dong Dang Virus" which eerily foreshadowed the impact of COVID-19, predicting a global shutdown of tourism for at least two years (Page et al., 2006).

The primary lesson from this crisis is the realisation that we need a better society. The pandemic has served as a catalyst, driving a movement towards regenerative tourism and a collective aspiration for positive change. It has highlighted the urgency of addressing contemporary challenges and emphasised the indispensable role of research in facilitating this transformation.

The COVID-19 crisis has accelerated our understanding of the importance of sustainability and the need to integrate it seamlessly into every aspect of the industry. Research has become pivotal in providing the insights and solutions to guide the industry towards a more sustainable and resilient future. Ultimately, the COVID-19 pandemic has underscored the transformative potential of research in shaping the future of the hospitality industry. By embracing a research-driven, design-based approach to education and industry collaboration, we can cultivate a new generation of game changers who are equipped to navigate disruptive challenges and create a more resilient and sustainable hospitality landscape.

Beyond a local context, I envision a broader, globally collaborative approach to research in the hospitality, leisure and tourism sectors. The establishment of a unified research centre could foster a more cohesive and impactful exploration of the challenges and opportunities facing the industry.

However, a key challenge remains in effectively translating research findings into practical applications in the curriculum and industry operations. Strengthening the integration of research principles into the educational framework, with professors and senior researchers actively involved in teaching, is essential to ensuring that research becomes an indispensable tool for driving innovation and change.

RW: Looking ahead, what is your vision for the future of the hospitality industry, and how will research shape this transformation?
IY: Scenario planning and futures research play crucial roles in envisioning the future of the hospitality industry. We are currently engaging in a collaborative project with all the hotel management schools in the Netherlands to explore the concept of the "Hotel of the Future". This initiative involves examining various scenarios and their implications for the evolving nature of hospitality, including the changing meaning of "hospitality" itself. As technology continues to disrupt the industry, we need to critically assess how the hotel experience and the role of the hotel manager may transform over the next 15 to 20 years.

One key area of focus is the impact of artificial intelligence. As AI and machine learning capabilities advance, we may see a significant reduction in the need for traditional hotel management functions as decisions become increasingly automated. This raises fundamental questions about the future relevance of hospitality management education and the skills required for future industry leaders.

Furthermore, we are exploring the future of hotel design and technology integration in guest rooms. What will the hotel room of the future look like, and what technologies will be seamlessly integrated to enhance the guest experience? This includes considerations around sleep, wellness, and travellers' evolving needs and expectations.

Another crucial area of research is the future of labour supply in the hospitality industry. As automation and robotics become more prevalent, we must consider the implications for the hospitality workforce and how we can prepare students for this changing landscape.

Alongside these technological transformations, we are also examining the future of food, tourism and cuisine. Climate change and other environmental factors will inevitably impact the availability and production of local signature dishes that have traditionally been a cornerstone of destination-based tourism.

In 2025, I plan to focus a significant research effort on the disruptive impact of artificial intelligence in the hospitality sector. Additionally, we will explore the future of luxury hotels, examining how the concept of luxury may evolve and the role of technology in shaping the high-end hospitality experience.

Through these multifaceted research initiatives, we aim to provide a comprehensive understanding of the hotel of the future, empowering students, industry professionals and policymakers to navigate the transformative changes ahead. By embracing design-based education and fostering collaborative research, we can cultivate the next generation of hospitality leaders and innovators.

RW: As we conclude our dialogue, do you have any final thoughts or aspirations you would like to share?
IY: What I most enjoy about my role as a professor is the ability to lead the debate and shape the future. Being in academia provides me with the freedom to be creative, to think critically, and to develop people through research and teaching. It is a wonderful privilege to supervise doctoral students and witness their growth, as well as to engage students in exploring the fascinating realms of futures literacy and disruptive change.

Ultimately, my passion lies in writing, researching and communicating about the future. I find great fulfilment in pushing the boundaries of what is possible and inspiring others to embrace the transformative potential of the hospitality industry. Whether it's through publications, keynote speeches, or collaborative projects, my aim is to be a thought leader, driving innovation and positive change.

I will continue to embark on my own journey of exploration, uncovering the insights and scenarios that will shape the hospitality landscape of tomorrow.

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