Front Office Systems:

Until the 1960's, nearly all hotels were operating under the manual system. At late 70's, with the introduction of computers, hotels shifted to semi-automated systems. Nowadays, most of the five-star hotels operate under the fully automated system. Below is a brief description of the three different systems under which hotels might operate.

1. Non-automated [manual] systems: This very system is the one characterized by the sole usage of hands. In fact, all formats, procedures, and different kinds of calculations are done manually.

2. Semi-automated [Electro-mechanical] systems: This system gets use of some Electro-mechanical equipment. In fact, under the semi-automated system, each department might have its own computer system under which it handles all its operations.

3. Fully automated [computer based] systems: That's the best system ever used in the hotel industry. In fact, it is characterized by the excessive use of departmental software package programs integrated and connected to a main frame or terminal situated at the front office department.

Guest Cycle under Three Different Systems:

At this stage, it is essential to notice that the following stages of the guest cycle under the three different systems do not conflict with each other. In fact, the only differences are due to the nature of the system use. Therefore, what will be discussed above is not the repetition of the sequence; rather only differences will be highlighted.

1. Non-automated systems:
A- Pre-arrival activities:

At the pre-arrival stage, reservation requests should be introduced in a loose-leaf notebook or index card. Moreover, only reservations up to 6 months horizons shall be honored. Lastly, it is not practical, under this very system, to issue reservation confirmation numbers, initiate pre-registration activities (at the exception of VIP and groups) and prepare occupancy forecasts. The reason is time and money loss along with insufficient labor force to manually conduct all the above mentioned activities.

B- Arrival activities:

At the arrival stage, guests shall either sign a page in the registration book or fill manually a registration record. Under this very system, the most widely used front office equipment is the room rack, in which registration records are inserted to serve as room rack slips. Moreover, registration books and records shall be time stamped as an internal control proving when the guest exactly came, who registered him/her...Lastly; guest folios shall be opened for each registered guest.

C- Occupancy activities:

Under the occupancy activities, registration records shall be prepared with multi-copies. In fact, one copy shall be distributed to room rack, another stamped to the guest folio, another given to switchboard operators, and a final copy handed to the uniformed service personnel. Lastly, guests with charge privileges charges and payments shall be posted to respective guest folios.

D- Departure activities:

·At departure stage, cashiers should settle each guest account's outstanding balance and get room keys back from guests. Moreover, cashiers shall notify the housekeeping department that the room is no more occupied (i.e. room status change) to let this very department clean the room and prepare it for new arrivals. In addition, cashiers shall remove room rack slips from room racks to indicate departure. Lastly, these very rack slips of departed guests shall be filed in a cardboard box to serve as a guest history record

2. Semi-automated systems:

· This very system is less common in small and middle size hotels. For, these very hotels, financially wise, might not afford the huge investments associated with the installation of different hardware and software.

· The main advantage of this very system over manual system is that various reports can *automatically* be generated. However, the major disadvantages associated with this system are various complexities of operating and controlling devices due to the fact that this equipment are not integrated with other systems and are subject to frequent maintenance problems.

A- Pre-arrival activities:

At this very stage, guests can either call a national reservation network or directly contact the hotel. Moreover, reservation clerks can prepare pre-registration records, guest folios, and information rack slips.

B- Arrival activities:

At this very stage, already reserved guests shall verify their pre-registration forms and have only to sign it. On the other hand, walk-ins shall complete a multiple copy registration record from the beginning.

C- Occupancy activities:

At the occupancy stage, in order to track the different guest charge expenditures and all other possible guest transactions, hotels get an intensive use of various kinds of vouchers. Moreover, the most widely used equipment, under this very stage, is the mechanical cash registers and front office posting machines. Lastly, under this very stage, night auditor shall continuously resolve any discrepancy in guest accounts and efficiently reconcile guest folios.

D- Departure activities:

At this very stage, cashiers shall relay room status information to the housekeeping department. Moreover, they should place registration records of departed guests in property's guest history files.

4. Fully automated systems: A- Pre-arrival activities:

Under this stage, the reservation department is equipped with a software package, which is _interfaced and_ _connected_ with one or more central reservation office(s). Moreover, the reservation department can automatically generate letters of confirmation, produce requests for guest deposits and handle pre-registration activities for all

types of guests and generate daily expected arrival lists, occupancy and revenue forecast lists...

B- Arrival activities:

- At this stage, various reservation records can be transferred to front office department. Moreover, hotels might be equipped with an on-line credit authorization terminals _for timely Credit Card Approval_, self check-in / check-out terminals. Lastly, all guest charges and payments are saved in electronic guest folios.
- As far as walk-ins are concerned, all registration activities should be initiated from the very beginning.

C- Occupancy activities:

Under this very stage, guest purchases at different revenue outlets are electronically transferred and posted to appropriate guest accounts. Moreover, the front office department can run and process continuous trial balances and, therefore, eliminate the tedious work for the Night Auditor.

D- Departure activities:

At this very stage, cashiers can automatically produce bills to be sent to various guests with direct billing privileges and create electronic guest history records.

IV- Front Office Forms:

At different stages of the guest cycle different forms are used depending on which operating system a hotel chooses. Below are some of the common forms used:

1. Pre-arrival activities:

a) Reservation record or a reservation file

b) Letter of confirmation

c) Reservation rack and reservation rack slips

2. Arrival activities:

a) Registration card (or record) or registration file b) Room rack and room rack slips

3. Occupancy activities:

a) Guest folio: shall be of duplicate forms and pre-numbered for cross-indexing control purposes

b) Vouchers: support documents detailing facts of a transaction, but does not replace the source document (i.e. the invoice). Examples of vouchers might include charge vouchers, allowance vouchers, paid-out voucher, and correction vouchers…

c) Information rack slips

4. Departure activities:

a) Credit card vouchers

b) Cash vouchers

c) Personal check vouchers

d) Transfer vouchers

e) Guest history records

V- Front Office Functional Organization:

Whatsoever system and setting the hotel might use, it should reflect easy access to the equipment, forms, and

supplies necessary. Moreover, the setting shall reflect position flexibility. Moreover, nowadays trend shows that traditional mail, message, and key racks are unnecessary at the Front Desk. Rather, they shall be stored in drawers or slots located under or away from the Front Desk. For, this would ensure security and safety of guests.

1. Front Desk designed alternatives:

a) Circular or semi-circular structure: this very structure provides an effective service to more guests and appears more modern and innovative but since guests will approach the Front Desk from all angles, more staff is needed.

b) Traditional straight desk: Under this very design, fewer staff is needed, but fewer guests can be served at the same time.

c) Deskless environment: Under this design, there is no Front Desk at all. This is usually replaced by a hostess, or steward welcoming the guest, seating him or her on a chair/sofa, and conduct registration activities there while, for example, having a cocktail or a drink.

VI- Front Office Equipment:

1. Room rack
2. Mail, message, and key racks
3. Reservation racks
4. Information racks
5. Folio trays or folio buckets
6. Account posting machine
7. Voucher racks
8. Cash registers
9. Telephone equipment