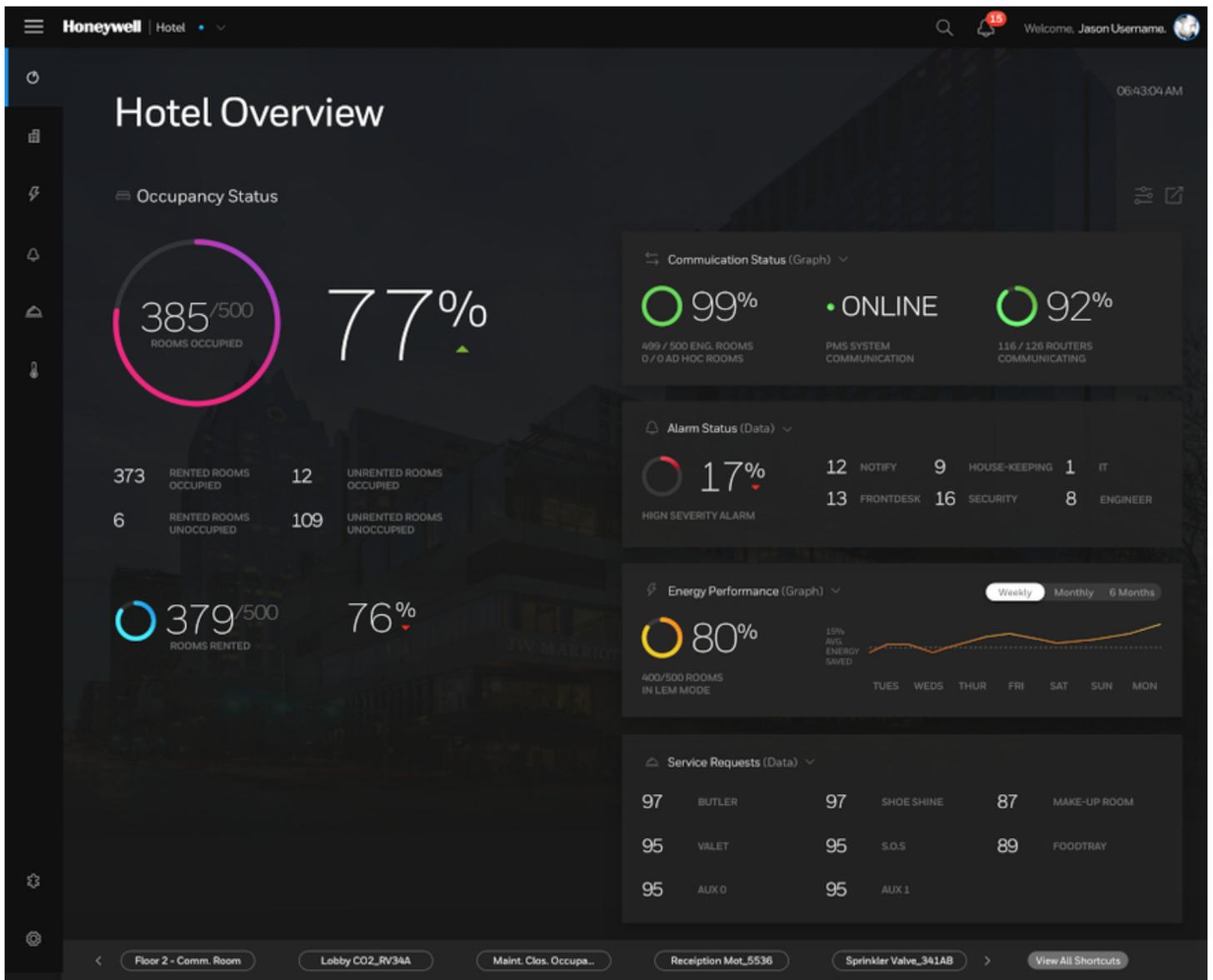




## Energy Management

## Updates, training boost energy-management benefits

by Chuck Dobrosielski | May 22, 2019 9:28am



INNcontrol5's hotel overview dashboard displays how many rooms are rented and occupied, the hotel's energy performance, how well the system's routers are communicating and the number and type of alarms the it has found. Photo credit: Inncom

Sensor-based energy-management systems present a straightforward way to manage expenses while being environmentally responsible, and as technology has improved, the possibilities have expanded. A system a hotel may have bought to simply turn the lights off when a guest leaves now also

can alert staff when something has gone wrong with a given room's heating, ventilation and air conditioning system. But if a hotel's engineers do not know how to properly use or understand a new system, those possibilities disappear.

At the most basic level, sensors tell a hotel whether a room is either occupied or unoccupied. As your work hours might determine how you schedule your personal thermostat, a room's state would decide what temperature to set a guestroom at. If a hotel is in a hot climate, it may set an unoccupied room to a higher temperature, if it's located somewhere cold, it would set it to a lower one.

Robert Smith, a senior technical training specialist at Inncom, said the company offers two options: a standalone system and a network system. As its name might imply, the standalone option is the simpler of the two. It runs in the background and does not receive much information. The network system, the more popular option, according to Smith, takes information from the property-management system to determine when a room is rented or unrented and then uses motion sensors and other room components to determine whether a room is occupied or not.

## What's New

Beyond adjusting the thermostat or turning off the lights, sensor systems today can open and close drapes to manage a room's temperature, alert the hotel when something is not working properly, offer housekeepers an idea of what rooms are occupied or not and provide hotels with long-term data on how their energy systems are working.

Kristin Miller, CEO at Evolve Controls, said the company's card reader system has become increasingly popular. Instead of relying on a sensor to tell the system whether a room is occupied, guests place their room key in a device as they enter and take it out as they leave, immediately informing the system of the room's status.

Evolve even has an option for if a hotel wants to turn off the energy-management system for a specific guest. Called VIP mode, the setting will keep the room temperature constant no matter if the guest is in or not. "We have hotel rooms that we've done that people are paying many thousands of dollars a night, and if the hotel has indicated for that particular guest that they want it really cool, they're just going to let the guest do that," Miller said.

Inncom recently began offering the cloud-based INNcontrol5. By connecting to the internet, the new system—Inncom also has the INNcontrol3—reduces the need for onsite infrastructure. Hotel engineers now can access the system on their phone or tablet and receive push alerts when something goes wrong. Grant Patterson, product marketing manager with the company, said with the new system, the company plans to release incremental updates every three months.

## Training Practices

When Evolve Controls finishes installing a new system, Miller said the company provides onsite training to the engineering group and anyone else at the hotel who's interested. Outside of that, the company offers online refresher courses and, through its service agreements, further training on an annual basis. For clients with large turnover, it will even offer education on a quarterly basis. Should the hotel want, Evolve will work with the management to determine what base settings are best for the hotel—what temperature should an occupied room be set to, how long should the system wait before adjusting the temperature or turning off the lights.

For Inncom, the size of the hotel determines the sort of training it offers. For smaller hotels, those with around 100 rooms, Smith said he'll typically invite staff to one of his twice-a-week online training sessions. As hotels increase in size and their setup becomes more complicated, he said he's more likely to come onsite and educate the engineering team in person. At one Orlando hotel with more than 1,000 rooms, he said he spent three days there, two sessions every day, educating the roughly 30-person team on how best to use the new system.

Describing it as "reverse training," Smith said these cases typically involve him finding an existing problem and helping the team solve it for themselves. At one hotel, he said, there was a room with an HVAC unit that continued to run, even when it was unrented. So, he brought his trainees to the room and he began testing the room's devices, making sure everything worked and communicated properly. No problem arose until he went to see if the system was accurately communicating when the door opened and closed. The door failed, so he switched out the batteries and yet the problem persisted. Then he went to see if the transmitter was connected to the magnet.

"So we started pulling on the little wire and it started coming and coming and coming and coming and coming and pretty soon we pull the entire wire out," Smith said. As the trainees stopped to think about the issue, they remembered the hotel had cut out and replaced the old wallpaper in its rooms two months ago and realized someone must have sliced too deep and split the wire connected to the magnet. As a result, the transmitter could not communicate correctly, ultimately resulting in the HVAC system running needlessly and wasting energy.

"If they had known that they cut the wire, this problem would have been solved a long time ago," he said. "But they didn't even know that the whole issue existed until we actually went in to do the training. And I was basically showing them, these are things you want to check on a regular basis."

## Making the Switch

When Evolve Controls outfits a hotel—the split is about 50/50 on new construction versus renovations, according to Miller—the time it takes to finish the job varies widely depending on the size of the hotel, from a few days for a 50-room hotel to a couple of months for big properties with a few thousand rooms.

Since the system doesn't require home run wiring, she said "if you're wired truly wireless, there isn't much difference between one [system] versus the other because we're simply switching out one switch for another. Potentially we're adding a switch, but those wires would be there." This ability, Miller said, makes Evolve Controls' setup particularly attractive for hotels in the middle of renovations because it means they do not have to mess with adding new wires.

In Inncom's case, switching from INNcontrol3 to the newer INNcontrol5 requires its own adjustments. Smith admitted when the new version came out, he was a little confused himself. "But as I've gone through it, I've used it and created these videos on it and things like that, it's becoming a little bit easier to teach and I don't think it's going to require any longer than the current [INNcontrol3] training does."

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