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## The front desk at your service

By Kate Allen



A welcoming reception: Simon Cooney, founder of Office Concierge

When a senior executive of a London-based energy trading company wanted to book last-minute tickets for the Belgian Grand Prix, plus a private château to stay in, he did not turn to his personal assistant, his secretary or even his company's receptionist. Instead, he contacted the front desk of the building in which his company is based.

Occupants of high-end office developments are becoming increasingly used to organising their social lives through their building's receptionists, whose traditional role of a landlord's representative is being redefined as property developers compete to attract occupiers. Indeed, in nearly 300 buildings across London, receptionists have morphed into full-scale concierges, with the costs covered by the service charge.

"In central London buildings, particularly the big offices and towers, it's becoming much more the norm now," says Sarah Crockford, a partner at CBRE, which acts as managing agent on many City offices. "With the high-end City occupiers, staff are expected to be in the building all the time. A concierge is a differentiator [for potential occupiers], not just on new buildings but on older ones as well, and it's definitely likely to become a wider trend in future."

This represents a marked shift from the days when on-staff PAs took care of the lifestyle extras of executives and external corporate concierge services were accessible at the end of a phone. Tenants can now expect their front-desk concierge to do everything from sourcing sold-out tickets to booking holidays.

One example is the new Heron Tower in the City of London, which has made its "six-star" concierge service a big selling point to prospective occupants. "The on-site concierge responds to the needs of tenants in the building, including international businesses that might have employees who don't reside in London permanently or companies for which corporate hospitality is an important part of their business," explains Lisa Ronson, commercial director of Heron International, the building's owner. "The concierge takes the level of service at Heron Tower above and beyond what tenants might expect, creating a sense of community."

Specialist companies that provide landlords with in-house concierges – such as Office Concierge and Portico – have long offered such services to banks, hedge funds and other City stalwarts on an external basis.

However, as their concierges have taken on a permanent presence at ground-floor front desks, clients' requests have started to evolve as workers get more used to having access to the service. There is a growing demand for technical assistance – with typical requests ranging from "Set up my iPhone for me" through to "Find a techie to completely re-network my home".

There is also more of a desire for the lifestyle side of things – new clubs, gig tickets, hot happenings – with the high-end concierges acting as a "how to be cool" advisory service. Unsurprisingly, restaurants, bars, nightclubs, shops and other luxury service companies are keen to tap into these services, viewing them as a shortcut to their ideal customers.

### From flight deck to front desk

Recruitment is one of a concierge businesses's biggest worries. As the face of the building, each member of staff has to fit in with the culture of the company with which they are placed. "What suits Google might not suit a major investment bank," explains

Simon Cooney, who founded Office Concierge 15 years ago, says the new approach is altering the business model, because individuals who would otherwise pay membership fees of £750-£900 now find that they in effect get the service for free through their employer. "The rents and service charges [in London] are high enough for occupiers to be able to afford to stump up – the cost on the service charge is pennies to add this to it," he says.

However, Andy Burk of Knight Frank, the estate agent, is sceptical as to whether the services will ever come to be regarded as a standard perk of office life. "It may be something that tips the balance between two comparable buildings, but people don't want to pay for it," he says. "If it's a start-up business or an incubator

Simon Cooney, founder of Office Concierge. His company uses psychometric testing to recruit some employees.

As appearance is vital, concierge companies typically employ wardrobe managers and give staff hair and make-up lessons. Many concierges are former flight attendants, partly because they understand the emphasis on grooming. The head of wardrobe at Office Concierge, for example, was previously in charge of grooming at Air France.

Each building usually has its own uniform, meaning that in most cases visitors will never even know that the receptionist dealing with them works for a third-party company. "In that sense, our presence aims to be invisible," says Mr Cooney.

That does not mean front-desk concierges do not get noticed, however. In fact, one of the biggest problems is retaining staff – they often get pinched by occupants of the buildings in which they work.

environment where there isn't anyone to do these traditional PA roles, then it could add value. But for the typical corporate occupier, we're not seeing this kind of demand."

Mr Cooney admits that his company focuses only on the high-end, high-profile office buildings. But, he says, traditional personal assistants do not have the skills to organise the more complicated, elite access that concierge services provide. "A lot of the time it's the PA who calls us up," he says.

Polly Plunket-Checkemian, a director of Cushman & Wakefield, the property agent, was one of the first people to encourage office developers to consider introducing a concierge service. "We had some detractors who were quite negative about it when it started – they expected the concierge to give them five [price quotes], and didn't understand that actually it's about getting preferential treatment from that one relationship. If you want bargain-basement [prices] then go and source these things yourself, but if you want someone to take the hassle out of it and deliver a reliable end result, a concierge is for you."

She says the key to broadening the service is to link it into working life. "Lifestyle services will only appeal to the ultra-top end of the market but business support services are commercially much more palatable to a much wider range of staff. And we would classify business support as everything from made-to-measure suit manufacturers coming into the office, through to organising fancy dress for the office Christmas party and holding regular IT guru sessions. That means the concierge service is suddenly corporate, rather than personal."

Office Concierge, which employs more than 600 staff, launched Privée, its luxury service, four years ago. Mr Cooney, who had the idea for the company when running a security business, explains why he thinks demand has ramped up in recent years: "Companies weren't going to pay for someone to deal with people's personal lifestyle demands during the recession. But in the past two years, companies have begun to love the idea that their staff will be making money for them, and not sitting on the phone trying to get hold of a dog-sitter or whatever."

Portico, his main competitor, is nine years old, employs 500 people and has 50 clients including banks UBS and Morgan Stanley, and PwC, the professional services firm. It recently teamed up with concierge business Sincerely Paul to offer Bespoke, a new office-based service.

Simon Pratt, Portico's managing director, spent a decade working in luxury hotels in London and the Middle East. His aim was to provide a similar level of service for the City's office workers. "It's all about excellent front-of-house services and when people don't have time to arrange something themselves, we wave our magic wand and sort it out," he says.

The leading services are now eyeing a move into existing clients' regional offices across Britain, and in a handful of cases have begun to operate across a company's Europe-wide operations. Office Concierge, for example, has been asked by clients to expand its offering to Paris and New York.

But is there anything they can't or won't do? "We won't provide introductions to women," says Mr Cooney firmly. "We can advise you on schools, nannies, domestic services, personal IT services, moving the entire contents of your home to another continent – all those things aren't a problem. But we won't get you a date with a model. No dating, no matchmaking, nothing disreputable. No, no, no."

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