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Grand Hyatt Atlanta in Buckhead's Wes Shirley: Always Chasing, Cultivating Big Ideas

6/30/2016 By Glenn Hasek

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Name: Wes Shirley
Title: Director of Engineering
Hotel: Grand Hyatt Atlanta in Buckhead
Years with hotel: Six

Primary responsibilities: "It's my responsibility to make sure every single guest that stays in our hotel has a flawless and enjoyable stay. I do that by making sure that my employees are happy, well trained and completely engaging with our guests. It's my responsibility to the owners to ensure that their building is well maintained. At all times it should look and run like a new hotel. It's also my duty to spend their money wisely, always looking for new, inventive ways to lower their costs without taking away from the guest experience. Lastly and most importantly is the environment. It is my responsibility to maintain the building, the guests and the employees with little to no impact on our environment. This is perhaps the most enjoyable part of my job."

Hotel's most significant sustainability-related accomplishment: "We have accomplished so much over the years but I really enjoyed the rain harvest project because the idea came to me while brain storming about bad weather and high water rates."

Hotel's most significant sustainability-related challenge moving forward: "Once our solar project is complete my next goal is a chiller/boiler plant project. I really think this will be our biggest project because there is so much you can do with a plant. I am researching different solar technologies to try to run pumps. I think this project will be fun yet challenging."

ATLANTA—It is no coincidence that big projects and accolades seem to gravitate toward Wes Shirley. The Director of Engineering at the Grand Hyatt Atlanta in Buckhead is always looking for something new to elevate the guest experience, cut costs and reduce environmental impact at the same time. Shirley, who fell in love with building and operating buildings at an early age, has been the driver behind projects such as a 50,000-gallon rainwater harvesting system and a 20-panel solar thermal system. This past week he accepted an award for the hotel as part of the Atlanta Better Buildings Challenge 2016 MVP Ceremony. Participants in the Challenge pledge to reduce energy and water consumption by 20 percent by 2020.

As Director of Engineering at the 439-room hotel, Shirley oversees a team of 12 engineers. He and the hotel's controller act as coaches of the green team which consists of one manager from every department. Ongoing education of hotel staff is key to the success of the property's green initiatives. "As hotel staff changes we are continually training our staff," Shirley says. "We actually start with the new hires but we do training consistently with all our employees. It's a way of life in our hotel. We also give them best practices for their home."

It was several years ago that Shirley was standing one day watching the rain fall on the third floor terrace of the hotel. He wondered how the hotel could best capture and recycle the rainwater. He got together with a couple of friends—a plumber and another engineer—to figure out a plan. What the three came up with, with the assistance of some students at Southern Polytechnic University, is the extensive rainwater harvesting system that now has the potential to capture 50,000 gallons of water. Condensate from the hotel's HVAC system and water from ice machines are also captured for reuse.

Investment in Solar for Water Heating

Earlier this year, hotel ownership (Host Hotels & Resorts) committed to the purchase of a 20-panel solar thermal system for the hotel's roof. That system will provide all of the heat needed for guestroom hot water and is expected to reduce gas consumption by 48,000 therms annually. "Right now they are running the piping and installing the racks," Shirley says. "The heat exchanger arrives in two weeks. The entire project will be completed and up and running by August 1."

The rainwater collection and solar thermal systems are just two of many initiatives at the hotel targeted at reducing energy and water consumption. One recent \$36,000 investment in new showerheads had a return on investment of just four months. Showerheads that had been consuming 2.5 gallons per minute (gpm) and generating guest complaints in the process were replaced with 1.4 gpm showerheads. Shirley pointed out the addition of a new irrigation system that utilizes satellite technology as also having a significant water-saving impact. Even unused water from water pitchers in meeting rooms is deposited into the rainwater collection system. A laundry water recycling system recycles about 5 million gallons per year.

Motion sensors in storage areas, back of house, offices, parking garage and stairwells have contributed to energy savings. So too have LED lighting, occupancy sensing thermostats, an energy management system, and high-efficiency motors. A newly revised towel/linen reuse program being tested allows guests to opt out entirely from housekeeping.

Waste management efforts include the recycling of fryer oil, mixed paper, cardboard, used bulbs, batteries and ballasts. When possible, food and other goods are purchased in bulk. Guestroom patio furniture is made from recycled water bottles and food waste is collected and converted into compost. Partially used soap is donated to Clean the World.

The hotel provides charging stations for electric vehicles and cleans using eco-friendly products. Pest control chemicals are also eco-friendly.

Raised Not Far from Grand Hyatt Atlanta in Buckhead

Looking back at his career, Shirley says, "I was raised in the suburbs of Atlanta. My entire family is in the construction and property management industries. I fell in love with building and operating a building from a very



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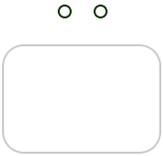


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early age. Directly after high school I followed in my father's footsteps and enlisted in the military for four years. After the military I needed to find a job that would work around my college schedule. I was fortunate enough to find a job as a maintenance employee at an apartment complex. Being a maintenance employee was originally as far away as possible to what my career goals were. I always thought that you had to wear a suit and a tie in order to be a leader or to make a difference. So to me, being a maintenance man was only a temporary gig to get me through school. It did not take long before I really started enjoying how the building operated. I truly enjoyed repairing things and figuring out how to operate them at a more efficient and lower cost than originally anticipated. I was doing this way before we ever used words like 'sustainable' or 'being green'. I was looking for technologies that didn't exist yet."



Shirley says he quickly became a supervisor and then moved up to the corporate office. His career path has included positions in the senior housing industry and then in hospitality with companies such as Wyndham and Hyatt.

When asked what he enjoys about his current work, Shirley said, "I truly enjoy researching ROI projects. Developing them. Convincing the owners to invest in them and overseeing the build out of the ROI projects. I also enjoy renovations. I also enjoy spending time with my employees. We are like a family. Sometimes functional family and sometimes dysfunctional family, but at the end of a day always a family. I love those guys."

When asked how he thinks the lodging industry is performing when it comes to sustainability, Shirley said, "I think the hospitality industry is doing a much better job than any other industry. Fifteen percent of all our business comes from companies that look for hotels that have great sustainable programs. We actually compete against one another in sustainability. I think an area that we could improve would be on the design side. It is sometimes difficult to convince designers to take a sustainable side when it comes to choosing finishes during a renovation. It seems like sometimes they only want to look at the cosmetic side and not the functionality or the impact on the environment."

Go to the [Grand Hyatt Atlanta in Buckhead](#).

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