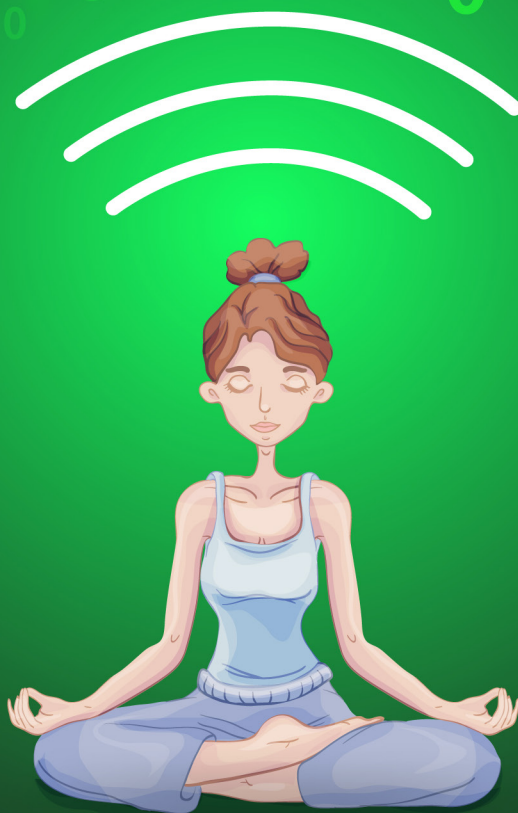


Mind game



The coronavirus pandemic has led to the 'super-acceleration' of digital wellness initiatives in hotels. Elly Earls speaks to **Emlyn Brown**, global vice-president of well-being for Accor's luxury and premium brands; **Egle Rukšenaite**, founder of wellness and hotel consultants E77; and **Irene Forte**, group project and wellness director for Rocco Forte Hotels, to find out where the sweet spot is between physical and digital wellness.

Many millennials at the older end of the cohort have a somewhat uneasy relationship with digital technology. Every week, it's not uncommon for them to turn off their smartphones for 24 hours to give themselves a much-needed break from the relentless news cycle and their Instagram feeds. A problem arises, however,

when they decide that it would be a good idea to do some meditation on their day off and then comes the realisation that their Headspace app is on their phone. They could attempt to reach silent enlightenment without the assistance of technology, but then their six-day run streak would be broken. And so the cycle continues.

The wellness industry has been grappling with a similar dilemma over the past decade. Ten years ago, the accepted solution was to combat people's growing addiction to smartphones and other tech gadgets by actively trying to ban or restrict their use in wellness environments. "Technology was viewed as a danger and deemed a conqueror," recalls Egle Rukšenaite, founder of wellness and hotel consultants E77. "Wellness was thought to be all about human connection, direct contact and naturalness."

Slowly but surely, however, that perception started to morph and for the past five years Rukšenaite has witnessed the entire hospitality industry go through a "fascinating transformation". "[We've] come to terms with the new future and a different world and realised that technology will open new possibilities for the world of wellness," she says.

The unexpected circumstances caused by the coronavirus pandemic have demonstrated sooner than Rukšenaite perhaps anticipated what that brave new world might look like. Just as Zoom has become an accepted tool for keeping in touch with friends and carrying out work meetings, fitness and mindfulness classes have migrated online and people have realised – in practice rather than just in theory – that it's possible to maintain wellness routines when they can't get to the gym or the yoga studio. And that it's more important than ever to do so.

Irene Forte, group project and wellness director for Rocco Forte Hotels, says this realisation was inevitable, although the pandemic has certainly accelerated it. Rocco Forte had introduced an in-room fitness offering before Covid-19, as well as mini mindfulness videos for guests to watch on their in-room TVs. The only new digital offering that the group has brought in this year is Google Maps jogging routes to replace paper ones.

"What's really grown is the more social side of things," Forte observes. The group now holds live facial massage demonstrations on its social media platforms, as well as sharing content on self-care and how to create a spa experience at home.

For Emlyn Brown, global vice-president of well-being for Accor's luxury and premium brands, this is another strange dichotomy hotels are grappling with as they move more into the digital realm. "Our industry is using social media and attractive images and posts to draw people into wellness, but at the same time, we're criticising it for not being disconnected, so it's quite a strange place to be," he admits.

And while Brown is keen to stress that he doesn't have all the answers, he's pretty sure of one thing: that it's no longer realistic for most operators to ask their guests to digitally detox as soon as they arrive. "The hyper connectivity we have is a significant challenge but the idea of saying 'turn your phone off'

actually will create more problems than solutions," he says. "Disconnection is vitally important but the way we approach it needs to change. We need to encourage best practice and nudge people towards better ways of using digital during that time off."

The democratisation of wellness

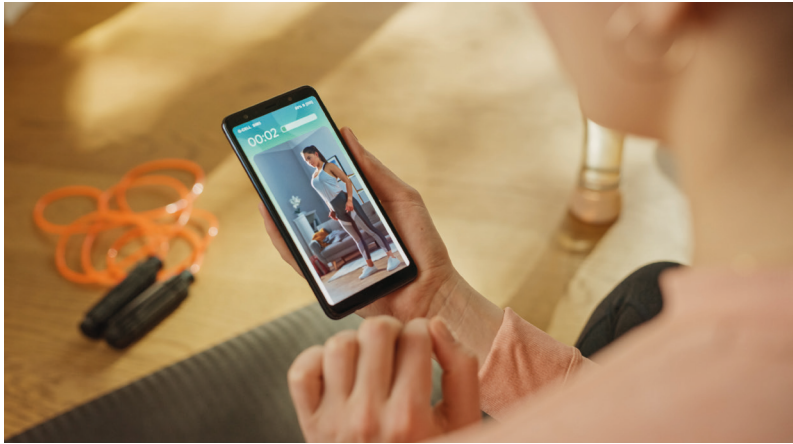
Mirroring Rocco Forte, digitalisation has been a discussion point at Accor over the past five years, and it has become a more urgent one in the past two or three. 2020 has only served to 'super accelerate' this facet of hotel well-being. Speaking to Brown on the one-year anniversary of the first Covid case in Wuhan, China, he explains how hotel operators that had been going in this direction are the ones who now have a leg up on those who have had to scramble to introduce online offers. "Now it's about blending the actual experience and the digital experience and finding ways of connecting with our guests not just within the hotel, but also outside the hotel," Brown explains.

Examples include Pullman's recent collaboration with Les Mills, whereby guests are able to access around-the-clock fitness classes and in-room fitness amenities while staying at the property, and can extend their subscription once they get home. Similarly, Novotel partnered with meditation app Calm in 2019 to help guests 'achieve inner calm' and have a more restful travel experience; they also get a complimentary 60-day membership to continue their journey in their everyday lives. "We can democratise well-being to our customers across all segments using technology," Brown says. "These programmes allow us to educate and support people to lead a healthier life as well as helping us reach a broader audience."

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Egle Rukšenaite

Rukšenaite has been taking a similar approach at E77, developing a new system called 'Wellness & Go', which she says will help people understand that the secret of well-being is not just a visit to a hotel or wellness centre, but also following a certain daily routine, something that is especially important during the pandemic when our lives can feel listless and limited. "We plan to transfer wellness to people's daily routine and provide customers with the opportunity to use wellness services, consultations at home, in their everyday



Covid-19 has 'super accelerated' the rise of digital wellness.

life. This IT tool will help to identify, properly and timely plan the next arrival at the wellness resort for diagnosis, prevention, deep rest," she explains.

In fact, Rukšenaite likens the future of wellness to the way we already look after our dental health. "We visit dentists several times a year because of the need for diagnostics and oral dental hygiene or medical treatment," she continues. "I think the same will happen with wellness – we will go to spas and wellness centres for a preventive check-up, to improve our health, but we will also have to perform certain rituals and incorporate wellness time into our daily lives.

"We in the wellness sector have to embrace and build maximum synergies with IT and innovation companies as quickly and widely as possible, and develop technologies that help spread wellness ideas to people around the world, into their homes, and daily routines."

"There's a pent-up demand for community-driven exercise, but it will be complemented by an at-home experience or an app tracking experience or a digital expectation that we also now need to meet."

Emlyn Brown

Implementation challenges

For Brown, it's vital to understand your demographic before introducing a new digital-focused offering. "You turn the volume up or down on digital depending on your audience," he says. At Pullman, for example, which generally attracts people who are carrying on their normal lives while they're on the road, being connected appeals, while the 'Emotional Wellbeing' programme at Raffles talks very clearly about disconnection.

There are also challenges around selecting the right content partner to work with. "We need to

partner with companies that can provide content over multiple cultures and geographies," Brown says. Accor's portfolio stretches from North America to furthest east Asia, from where many of our contemporary 'spiritualities' and remodelled forms of 'wellness' – now available in app form – stem.

And then there's the question mark over how to deliver the content within a hotel effectively. Is there a system or technology to deliver it or do you simply push it onto people's own platforms? "I think probably the latter," Brown says. "That's the way we should be moving; allowing people to have access to content that we support via their own devices."

For Forte, such innovation might be difficult to showcase return on investment from digital add-ons to management. "We don't really use digital as a revenue generator; we're using it as more of an experience," she says. "We don't want to charge someone to do a mindfulness video or a fitness class in-room because there's so much free content at the moment."

Physical meets digital

While digital innovation will clearly play a big role in the future of wellness, what Forte has found reassuring during the past few months is that even though other areas of hotels have been struggling, people still want to look after themselves.

"We haven't seen that people are too scared to come in for spa treatment; in fact, we've seen bigger demand than before. Guests might be scared to go out in the evenings, but spas are a one-on-one experience where you know the therapist is wearing a mask, a shield and gloves and has sanitised everything," she says.

On the fitness side of things, Brown has no doubt things will pick up in short order. "There's a pent-up demand for community-driven exercise, but it will be complemented by an at-home experience or an app tracking experience or a digital expectation that we also now need to meet," he predicts. "There will be a return in terms of our business levels from a physical point of view but at the same time, there'll be a need for us to invest continually in digital. That's where the sweet spot's going to be."

In a world trapped in a seemingly endless cycle of lethargy and lockdowns, it feels natural that a renewed focus on well-being is also going digital. Like other wellness giants, hotels and hospitality providers will need to think carefully about maintaining the delicate balance between meaningful connection and obsessive over-digitalisation. Those that strike that note can help their guests switch off and get some much-needed respite from an R rate that never seems to rest. ●