

The Future of the Hotel Industry Lies in Sustainability

In context of the Life project **EnergyEfficiency4HORECA**, the Energy Institute for Business (EIW) hosted a discussion as part of its **EIW Energy Talk** series, which saw a stimulating exchange of views amongst recognised experts on the current situation, challenges and prospects for sustainable tourism in Austria:

Nicole Hartl from the Austrian Energy Agency (AEA) is responsible for buildings and tourism within the *klimaaktiv* initiative, which operates across Austria and is particularly active at a local level in the federal states.

Regina Preslmair from the Federal Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, Climate and Environmental Protection, Regions and Water Management (BMLUK) is committed to promoting the quality and uptake of *Österreichisches Umweltzeichen* – the Austrian Ecolabel.

Ewald Sarugg (IMPACTING.WORK) has many years' experience as a management consultant in the fields of energy, the environment, funding and negotiation management.

Johannes Scheiblauber, Regional Chair for Lower Austria at the Austrian Hotel Association (ÖHV), runs two flagship establishments for sustainable tourism in Lower Austria's Mostviertel region – the *Relax Resort Kothmühle* and *Schloss an der Eisenstraße*.

At the start of the event, presenter **Mario Jandrokovic** (EIW) introduced the EU project **EnergyEfficiency4HORECA**, which aims to boost energy efficiency measures in SMEs across the entire HORECA value chain (hotels, restaurants, catering). As part of this project, the EIW Energy Talk was intended to shed light on the reasons behind the successful performance of Austria's tourism businesses in terms of energy efficiency and sustainability.

From a global perspective, the tourism sector accounts for 8 per cent of worldwide energy consumption – which highlights the value of using a cross-border project in this sector as a lever for energy savings. Alongside Austria (represented by the EIW), partners from Belgium, Germany, France, Latvia and Spain are also involved in **EnergyEfficiency4HORECA**.



Sustainability as a strength of the domestic hotel industry: a round-table discussion with the following participants (from left):

Birgit Krista (EIW), Regina Preslmair (BMLUK), Ewald Sarugg (auditor), Mario Jandrokovic (EIW), Nicole Hartl (AEA / klimaaktiv), Johannes Scheiblauber (hotelier / ÖHV)

Image: Oliver Dworak (EIW)

Österreichisches Umweltzeichen, the Austrian Eco-Label, is an objectively verifiable indicator of how Austria's tourism sector incorporates sustainability as a quality feature in the face of international competition. By 2026, there are 1,046 businesses in the tourism, hospitality and cultural sectors holding

this sustainability certificate introduced in 1996; their number has risen significantly in recent years. Since 2023, this Label has been awarded not only to individual businesses and companies in the travel and events sector, but also – in the interests of the entire value chain – to tourist destinations.

Regina Preslmair points out that Austria's Federal Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, Climate and Environmental Protection, Regions and Water Management has a means of exerting influence directly in the federal states via the eco-label. This enables environmental strategies to be implemented more effectively across the region.

Ewald Sarugg asks whether, thanks to the success of the eco-label, sustainability in tourism has to some extent become a self-perpetuating phenomenon. **Regina Preslmair** approves so and adds that, now that sustainability has entered the public consciousness, companies are also taking greater care to report their own efforts accurately so as not to be accused of greenwashing.

Change Requires Commitment

When asked about his many years of experience with corporate sustainability, **Johannes Scheiblauer** lists a range of measures that have been implemented – from lighting and speed-controlled pumps to switching the heating supply to wood chips, photovoltaic systems and environmental certifications; the next step, he says, will be the installation of an air-source heat pump.

As most of the CO₂ emissions in the tourism sector arise from guests' journeys to the destination, **Scheiblauer** welcomes initiatives such as the *Klimaticket*, an annual travelcard for the whole public transport in Austria for 1.400 Euros per year. For the 'last mile', he wanted to establish a bus service in collaboration with the local council, subsidised by the government. As the local council was not interested in this project, he now by himself established a shuttle service for guests arriving by public transport. An electric bus is available for this purpose.

Change is not easy to achieve; as an entrepreneur, you have to be fully committed to it yourself. The ambitious goal of switching the culinary offering in his establishments entirely to organic products was achieved to over 90 per cent. For some smaller local producers, the cost of organic certification is too high, and guests sometimes ask for specific drinks that are simply not available as organic products. The range of meat-free dishes has also been expanded and made more appealing, so that more guests choose them. Cost-effectiveness remains a key factor in implementing such measures on a long-term basis. Customers are only willing to accept higher costs to a very limited extent. Since the war in Ukraine, however – for instance due to the rise in the cost of artificial fertiliser, the price of conventional food has risen more sharply than that of organic products – meaning the premium for organic has consequently narrowed. Green Meetings are offered as standard at his venues, but the response from customers has been lacklustre. **Regina Preslmair** confirms that there is clearly still room for improvement in terms of awareness of Green Meetings and the opportunities they present for corporate communications – this is evident, for example, in the buffets at events that are supposedly dedicated to sustainability.

When asked whether it has become easier to convince businesses to invest in sustainability, **Nicole Hartl** replies that cost pressures have noticeably increased the demand for efficiency measures. However, relatively short-lived crises in the past have ultimately led to a wait-and-see attitude amongst companies. One of the focuses of the Austria-wide *klimaaktiv* initiative is on training staff in small and medium-sized enterprises – the key concept here being self-efficacy. The level of the sustainability debate has generally risen, and classic basic measures such as switching to LED lighting or water-saving equipment have been implemented to such an extent that they no longer need to be promoted as heavily as they used to – an ever-decreasing number of businesses still need guidance on these basic issues.

Setting a Good Example Works: Best Practice and Benchmarks

Examples of good practice and, above all, regional partnerships are important for engaging with businesses. When asked whether sustainability is a decisive factor as a brand in international competition, **Nicole Hartl** says that guests first choose a destination and only then a hotel. However, she agrees with **Regina Preslmair** and **Ewald Sarugg** that Austria is clearly ahead of other destinations in this respect. **Johannes Scheiblauber** believes that, when it comes to travel destinations, too little attention is still being paid to the effects of climate change. Water scarcity is becoming an increasingly serious issue – even in supposedly water-rich countries such as Austria. And Austria is disproportionately affected by global warming, even compared to the rest of Europe.

One of the starting points of the Energy Talk was that the hotel industry is a sector in which sustainability is also strongly promoted as a mark of quality. This led to the question put to **Ewald Sarugg** as to whether, in his experience as an auditor, awareness of energy efficiency was more pronounced in the hotel sector than in other industries. – According to his findings, this is not necessarily the case. Motivation however is crucial for successful auditing. The benchmarks which were to be found on the Austrian Energy Agency's energy efficiency platform had proved particularly effective in this regard. Anyway, these benchmarks – developed by the Energy Agency in collaboration with the EIW in 2012 – are out of date and therefore no longer available; an update would be welcomed by all those present.



*Regina Preslmair, Ewald Sarugg
Image: Mario Jandrokovic (EIW)*



*Nicole Hartl, Johannes Scheiblauber
Image: Mario Jandrokovic (EIW)*

Energy Efficiency Does not always Require Investment

Audits show that many measures can be implemented without any investment. As an example, **Sarugg** cites a chiller that had never been set up correctly and therefore switched on and off constantly at short intervals, which not only drastically increased energy consumption but also would also reduce the unit's service life by 50 per cent. Significant savings can often be made on heating systems too, without the need for investment – simply by ensuring the equipment is set correctly. A large proportion of the costs associated with such systems arise during operation anyway: the initial purchase costs usually account for less than 20 per cent of the total life-cycle costs.

Johannes Scheiblauber points out here that the energy-efficient operation of systems is sometimes hampered by regulatory requirements. For example, the regulations governing air exchange in guest rooms date back to a time when smoking was still permitted, and the prescribed values for kitchens are also set too high: today's standard induction hobs generate far less heat. **Regina Preslmair** and **Ewald Sarugg** are keen to find out more about these regulations (and who is responsible for them in Austria).

And what political measures in Austria would be welcome in the interests of energy efficiency? – **Nicole Hartl** sees the continuity and predictability of funding schemes as a crucial factor: the relevant funding pots are often only available for a very limited period, and this has a negative impact on businesses' confidence. Those present ultimately agreed that this stop-and-go policy regarding funding for renewables and energy efficiency measures puts recipients under pressure to act. For contractors such as installers, this market distortion caused by funding schemes means that they face an unmanageable workload in the run-up to the deadlines for implementing measures, whereas after these deadlines there is a shortage of orders, which makes sound business management difficult. **Regina Preslmair** criticises the belief that the implementation of these measures is necessarily dependent on funding.

There is also a consensus on the importance of raising awareness amongst staff. It is generally accepted that, even with the best technical equipment, the human factor is crucial for the efficient use of energy. **Ewald Sarugg** emphasises that the human factor can have a very positive impact here, but can also cause a great deal of damage through careless actions. When asked to what extent *building automation* is helpful in this regard, **Sarugg** cites large shopping centre on the outskirts of Vienna the Auhof Centre as a positive example, as it was able to reduce its energy consumption by 24 per cent through AI-supported device control. **Johannes Scheiblauer** adds that, as the person in charge of the company, his main concerns lie with customer demand and day-to-day operations – which is why senior management usually only recognise unfavourable trends in consumption at a very late stage – for example, when faced with a high annual electricity bill. Building automation can quickly pinpoint the sources of these problems – and in this way, significant savings can be achieved. The topic of building automation also comes up in connection with the complexity of energy efficiency measures in listed historic buildings.

Finally...

For **Regina Preslmair**, another aspect of digitalisation is increased data transparency. She would also like to see valid energy benchmarks for Austria's businesses, and she sees potential here, for example, in the energy consumption reports that are mandatory for the award of the eco-label. In the context of digitalisation, gamification could also be key to motivating not only staff but also guests.

Ewald Sarugg also sees the greater transparency of data as a positive development – as well as the fact that the audit results are now more binding on companies, given that those in charge must confirm in writing that they have received the report, which contains recommendations for improvement.

Johannes Scheiblauer wants to give the guests something to take home – i.e. to inspire them through his authentic approach to engage with sustainability at home as well. Lecturing and appeals to people's guilty consciences are counterproductive when it comes to fostering climate-friendly behaviour in the long term. It is important to him that sustainability does not become an issue for the elite, but remains accessible to everyone. This last point gives rise to a discussion on how awareness of energy efficiency can be raised in an accessible way – **Ewald Sarugg** shares his experiences of working with asylum centres.

With this in mind, **Nicole Hartl** also emphasises once again in conclusion that partnerships should be encouraged in order to reach even more people, with the aim of increasing self-efficacy.



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