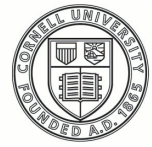
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Disability Employment in the Hospitality Industry: Human Resources Considerations

Abstract
[Excerpt] The characteristics of the hospitality industry are extremely dynamic and differ from other industries. In the United States and many other parts of the world, the predominant industry is transitioning from manufacturing to service. The hospitality industry is growing—the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics expects the hospitality industry to add 17% in wage and salary employment, compared to the 14% for all other industries combined. The nature of the hospitality industry makes it very labor intensive. Additionally, the hospitality industry has extremely high employee turnover rates. While the annual turnover rate for all industry sectors was 39.6% the leisure and hospitality sectors averaged 74.6%.

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CORNELL HR REVIEW

DISABILITY EMPLOYMENT IN THE HOSPITALITY INDUSTRY: HUMAN RESOURCES CONSIDERATIONS

Kelly Donnelly & Jeffrey Joseph

NATURE OF THE PROBLEM

Hospitality Industry

The characteristics of the hospitality industry are extremely dynamic and differ from other industries. In the United States and many other parts of the world, the predominant industry is transitioning from manufacturing to service. The hospitality industry is growing—the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics expects the hospitality industry to add 17% in wage and salary employment, compared to the 14% for all other industries combined.[1] The nature of the hospitality industry makes it very labor intensive. Additionally, the hospitality industry has extremely high employee turnover rates. While the annual turnover rate for all industry sectors was 39.6% the leisure and hospitality sectors averaged 74.6%.[2]

People with Disabilities

People with disabilities are the largest minority in the United States. There are approximately 50 million people with a disability, and about 10.4% of working-age individuals have disabilities.[3] Despite these large numbers, the employment rate of working-age people with disabilities in the United States is 39.5%, less than half that of their counterparts without disabilities (79.9%).[4]

In the upcoming years, a greater portion of the available workforce will have a disability for four main reasons: medical and technological advances as well as demographic and legislative changes. Medical advances have enhanced the ability to diagnose disabilities earlier, and better treatments mean more people with disabilities can work. Second, technological advances in assistive technology allows for more disabilities to be effectively accommodated at an affordable price.[5]

Third, demographic changes, including the aging US population and returning veterans, are increasing the number of individuals with disabilities. People over the age of 65 are four times more likely to have a disability than those aged 21 to 64. While many people over the age of 65 are on their way to retiring or already retired, a

large portion of this population is staying in the workplace beyond the traditional retirement age. Also affecting demographic change are the returning disabled veterans who are reentering the workforce as armed conflicts abroad begin to wind down. Lastly, legislative changes over the definition of "disability" impacts the number of employees considered disabled. For example, the ADAAA's expanded definition of disability allows more people to be covered by the ADA and receive accommodation.[6]

Employees with Disabilities in the Hospitality Industry

Many sources state that a shrinking labor force will be one of the biggest challenges facing the hospitality industry in the upcoming years.[7] Due to the economic crisis, unemployment has risen, making it easier for employers to find and retain talent. When the economic crisis eases, the workforce and demographic forces that are in place will kick into high gear as baby boomers begin exiting in large numbers. While stories about layoffs feature prominently in the media, many sectors, including hospitality, will experience a talent shortage in the coming years. Smith and Clark estimate the service industry will create 5 million new jobs from 2004 to 2014.[8]

Service occupations already hire the greatest percentage of people with disabilities—8.7% of workers employed in service occupations have a disability.[9] Within service occupations, 7.8% of food preparation and serving workers have a disability. By pairing together the facts that more working-aged individuals will be considered disabled in the coming years with the knowledge of a talent shortage in the hospitability industry, it is safe to assume that the percent of workers with a disability in service occupations will be increasing. This means people with disabilities are an important upcoming source of labor. Disability inclusiveness will be a key strategy many companies should focus on when preparing for upcoming workforce changes.

THE EMPLOYMENT PROCESS

The following research findings focus on the four main parts of the employment process—recruitment, hiring, retention, and advancement. Each section summarizes key points from available literature and is supplemented by personal accounts. Suggested best practices are included for each stage.

Recruitment

The majority of literature places the most importance on the recruitment and hiring of people with disabilities. Active recruitment of individuals with disabilities is extremely important in creating a diverse workforce. Employment agencies can provide valuable services to companies wanting to recruit people with disabilities. Lastly, one way to make recruiting people with disabilities a top-down commitment within an organization is to include "disabilities" in corporate diversity plans.

Active Recruitment: Service firms are more likely to actively recruit those with disabilities than are manufacturing firms. In a survey of 320 hospitality companies, 22.8% of large companies actively recruit people with disabilities, while medium-size and small-size actively recruited people with disabilities less frequently (17.7% and 12.4%, respectively). This is because larger companies have greater recruiting resources at their disposal.[10]

While it may be easier for large companies to actively recruit people with disabilities, interviewees demonstrated that small companies could just as effectively do the same. Whenever Kerry Lee, the general manager of The Murray Hill Inn and Suites (a 76-room property) has an opening in an entry-level position, he notifies a local employment agency that works with people with disabilities.[11] Other smaller hospitality companies should follow this example of tapping into this underutilized workforce.

Employment Agencies: Employment agencies offer valuable services by effectively pre-screening candidates to make sure they are qualified for the job. Mr. Lee stated he has worked with Our House NJ, a local employment agency, to hire 15-20 employees with disabilities over the past 20 years. Some of these hires have worked as many as ten years for the company.[12] Although employment agencies can provide hospitality companies with valuable resources, they are not widely utilized. Because the various employment agencies often lack an umbrella organization, employers find it cumbersome to maintain contact with many agencies at once. Human resources professionals would prefer to develop a relationship with one or two people instead of dealing with a different person from each agency.[13]

Employment agencies should be on the front-line combating concerns about hiring workers with disabilities. Agencies could increase employment by generating awareness in hotels and restaurants about the benefits of hiring people with disabilities and by offering assistance in determining appropriate accommodations. Other services offered by employment agencies, including on-the-job coaches, are a valuable asset for people with disabilities during the training process.

Corporate Diversity Plans: Commitment from top management is the best method for reducing employment and advancement barriers.[14] Though most organizations have a diversity plan, only 40% include disabilities.[15] A few hospitality companies are noted for their top management commitment to employing people with disabilities. Marriott International is considered to be a leader in disability initiatives by both employing people with disabilities in its own company and founding a non-profit organization to aid special education high school graduates with job placement.[16]

If companies want to utilize the available labor pool of people with disabilities, there needs to be top-down support. Including disabilities in corporate diversity plans will

demonstrate that top management is committed to employing people with disabilities. This commitment will trickle down to managers and supervisors as they make recruitment and hiring decisions.

Hiring

Human resources professionals in the hospitality industry hold many of the same concerns about hiring people with disabilities as professionals in other sectors—most notably inability to perform the work and accommodation costs. Beyond these concerns shared by most industries, the hospitality industry provides a unique set of hiring challenges. First, the broader issues revolving around hiring people with disabilities will be discussed, and then particular attention will be paid to specific issues in hospitality.

Nature of the Work: The most commonly cited challenge in hiring people with disabilities was the "nature of the work." Of the 320 hospitality and leisure companies surveyed, 77% believed that people with disabilities would not be able to do the work.[17] In the same survey, 55.7% of companies were concerned that employees with disabilities lack experience and skills. These percentages reflect common misconceptions about employing people with disabilities. Labor pool statistics in Canada show that the working age people with disabilities (ages 21-64) are the least likely to have severe disabilities.[18] Unemployed people with disabilities also tend to have very high levels of education, demonstrating that, as a whole, they are well-educated and qualified to work.[19]

Despite the stereotype that people with disabilities are not qualified or cannot work as hard as employees without disabilities, employers consistently rate them average or above average in performance, quality and quantity of work, flexibility, and attendance.[20] Mr. Lee stated that employees with physical or cognitive disabilities at his hotel perform at the same (or higher) level as the rest of the employees following adequate training.[21]

Accommodation Costs: Many surveys cite that a top concern of employers is the potentially high cost of providing reasonable accommodations to employees with disabilities.[22] In a survey of 320 hospitality and leisure companies, 69.3% cited "actual cost of accommodation" as a challenge in hiring people with disabilities.[23]

Although the majority of hospitality companies were concerned about the costs of accommodation, research shows that most accommodations are "low cost". A Job Accommodation Network survey found that 49% of reasonable accommodations cost nothing and 78% cost less than $500.[24] There are also three tax subsidies for private companies to use towards the cost of reasonable accommodations.[25]

Unionized Hotels: In the United States, unionized hotels are often concentrated in large, urban cities. Unions represent roughly 12% of all U.S. hotel workers. In unionized cities, about 35% of hotel workers are organized. In cities like Las Vegas and New York, which are heavily unionized, approximately 90% of hotel workers are unionized.[26]

This concentrated number of unionized hotel properties could create a barrier for employing people with disabilities. Seniority rights—one of the benefits of belonging to a union—are trumped by the ADA when the accommodation options include moving an employee to an open position despite a lack of seniority.[27] This and other collective bargaining agreement stipulations could create potential conflicts between the ADA and NLRA. When accommodating an employee with a disability, a human resources professional should work with the union to find a reasonable solution to prevent jeopardizing union relations.

Physical Appearance: Employment agencies describe the hotel industry as having a preference for employees that are young and considered physically attractive.[28] According to a study by Nickson et al., the appearances, physical looks, and self-presentation skills of customer facing employees were more important to employers than hard or technical skills. Physical appearance as a selection criterion might be a barrier to people with disabilities wanting to work in the hotel industry. This is because people often view themselves, or are viewed by others, as being limited in their aesthetic and self-presentation skills due to their disabilities.[29]

Although the aforementioned research demonstrates people with physical disabilities may face employment barriers because of the preference for physically attractive employees, other research contradicts this. Customers favor companies that hire and accommodate employees with disabilities as shown by the fact that 93% of customers surveyed said they would prefer to patronize a business that has people with disabilities in its workforce.[30] This statistic shows that customers are willing to change their spending patterns based on a company's employment of people with disabilities. This could be an impetus to place employees with disabilities in visible customer service roles.

Multi-Tasking: In many hospitality environments, employees are expected to multi-task on a regular basis. Some employees, when necessary, work far outside of their job description (e.g., cover shifts in a different department). This necessary flexibility can be a barrier to employment for people with disabilities. While an employee with a disability may be able to complete the essential functions of their job (with or without accommodation), they may or may not be able to multi-task or "pitch-in" to help out in a tough situation.

Companies allow employees with disabilities the flexibility to get their job done in a variety of different ways. If employees with disabilities are expected to work in different departments, managers should plan in advance and have reasonable accommodations for those tasks on hand. For example, if a front-desk employee with a visual impairment may be expected to work at the concierge desk, that computer should also be preemptively set up with the necessary assistive technologies.

Part-time Work: Employment in most parts of the hospitality industry revolves around part-time and temporary/seasonal employees—these employees meet the fluctuating needs of the hotel without committing to the extra costs of hiring a full-time employee. The Department of Labor estimates that two out of five employees in the hospitality industry are part-time employees—more than twice the proportion for all other industries.[31] This flexibility necessitated by the nature of the hospitality industry could be a barrier to employment for people with disabilities because part-time employees usually receive limited benefits.[32] This could dissuade people with disabilities (some of whom may need full benefits to cover the cost of medication) from applying if employment means forgoing full governmental support for medication.

While the use of part-time and temporary employees is unlikely to change, companies in the hospitality industry can find reasonable ways to accommodate the needs of people with disabilities. For example, companies can set-up their benefits plan in a way where employees with disabilities will not lose government assistance for necessary medication.

Retention

Once people with disabilities are recruited and hired, it is important that certain measures be taken to ensure adequate retention rates. Managers' attitudes play a huge role in the retention of people with disabilities. Also, Human resources departments with limited staffing can contribute to the difficulties in receiving appropriate accommodations. Lastly, the availability of accessible transportation can determine if an employee with a disability will be able to retain their job.

Role of Managers: One of the key factors that influence the retention of people with disabilities within the hospitality industry is the receptiveness of hotel managers to accommodating the needs of employees with disabilities. A survey conducted within the Canadian hotel industry stated, "top managers are the key decision makers whose support is crucial in the development and implementation of programs and initiatives tailored toward the attraction and retention of persons with disabilities."[33] When employees with disabilities have been properly accommodated, studies show they exhibit high job retention, which directly benefits employers. Once the company makes that initial investment to train and accommodate a disabled worker, they are

more likely to gain a reliable and loyal employee. That loyalty will save them from the costs associated with the high turnover rates prevalent within the hospitality industry.[34]

Mr. Lee noted the flexibility and accommodations that hiring managers in the hospitality industry need to provide to workers with disabilities in order to successfully retain them.[35] At his hotel, an employee named Jeannie with Down syndrome worked at the hotel for a while at repetitive tasks such as laundry folding. Though she was well-suited to perform the tasks, she desired customer interaction. So, through a process of trying out several positions, the hotel was able to place her in a job that she was not only well qualified for but that also gave her the satisfaction that she desired from work. The process undertaken by the managers at the Murray Hill Inn & Suites should serve as a model for the interactive process that should play a role in helping to retain employees with disabilities.

Limited Human Resources Staffing: Another issue that could potentially inhibit the retention of people with disabilities is the limited human resources staff at many hotel properties. One case study stated on average "three HR employees are responsible for 358 employees."[36] This limited number of human resources staff means hotels may not have the time or flexibility required to fulfill the accommodation process needed to ensure the retention of workers with disabilities. This issue could be remedied by providing adequate training to human resources professionals on how to accommodate individuals with disabilities. That way, when issues arise they do not seem as daunting.

Transportation: Transportation to and from the workplace is the third major barrier to retaining workers with disabilities. Mary Ellen Mest, of the National Statler Center for Careers in Hospitality Service affirms that "reliable transportation for people with disabilities is very important [for retention]. In the first 90 days, a new hire must not be late. Calling off because of unreliable transportation may get you let go."[37] This problem is less prevalent in urban areas where widespread public transportation is easily accessible. The high prevalence of shift work (often taking place late at night or early in the morning when most public transportation is closed) in the hospitality industry also poses a barrier to people with disabilities who are assigned to these shifts.

Issues related to transportation should be part of the considerations managers in the hospitality industry account for when they hire a person with a disability. Otherwise, managers will likely end up hiring a disabled worker just to subsequently let them go for attendance issues. Underscoring how significant a barrier to retention transportation is, Mest states that "somehow, somewhere, there must be more work done to provide reliable transportation for PWD. When you start off your day being

late, this adds to a level of stress and affects the work. It's an understatement to say that it's very frustrating for us here at The National Statler Center to see our graduate win the job, onboard and train, be successful, but lose the job to unreliable transportation."[38] Employers should realize on the front end that transportation is an issue for employees with disabilities and work them to create a reasonable transportation accommodation plan.

Advancement

When examining advancement for workers with disabilities in the hospitality industry, it is important to understand that most of these employees are confined to entry-level, hourly positions. This is a significant issue because these types of positions are normally not hired with advancement in mind. Additionally, many of these service positions do not offer full-time yearly employment to people with disabilities. As a result, disabled individuals dependence on government aid increases, thereby decreasing their likelihood for independence.

Assumed Abilities of People with Disabilities: Managers within the hospitality industry make assumptions about the abilities people with disabilities and place them into lower paid entry-level positions before considering their ability to do other jobs. These actions are informed by set ideas and stereotypes about the types of jobs that people with disabilities can perform. A research study of the hospitality industry found "there was agreement on the view that people with mental disabilities can perform tasks which are routine, which have a given order and sequence and which can be learned as a stereotype (such as kitchen tasks, photocopying, laundry, gardening)."[39]

While it is true that disabilities create inherent limitations, it needs to be understood that people with the same disability can have a wide range of abilities and limitations. People with disabilities are often pigeonholed into certain types of positions without managers conducting in-depth assessments of the particular individuals. For more advancement opportunities to occur in the industry, managers need to create them. For example, an employee with a mental disability could be given more responsibility to train other employees a task or job that they have mastered and can perform well.

Biases Towards People with Disabilities: The assumptions that managers make about the abilities of workers with disabilities stem from inherent biases and serve as a major barrier to advancement. The biases human resources professionals have about people with disabilities also extends to how they view their motivation to work. Ms. Mest, who works to place individuals with disabilities into jobs in the hospitality industry, states that "people with disabilities are no different that people without disabilities. Some people want to advance, some do not."[40]

Some managers within the hospitality industry do not share this view—they feel people with disabilities will be content in whatever position they are given.[41] When asked about the lack of advancement of people with disabilities, one human resources professional stated, "I think it's by choice ... they are happy with their jobs and they want to stay where they are." Views such as this mean that, in the future, managers are less likely to encourage people with disabilities to seek advancement opportunities, which is a significant barrier.[42] Managers should not make assumptions about the desires of disabled workers and should instead provide information on promotional opportunities to all individuals. In order to promote advancement of people with disabilities, the industry should ensure workers with disabilities have access to the information about these opportunities by placing them in accessible locations and formats.

HUMAN RESOURCES CONSIDERATIONS

Human Resources Best Practices

Most literature on workers with disabilities in the hospitality industry revolves around accommodating the needs of customers with disabilities. Even though best practices for employing people with disabilities are easily found in literature, surveyed companies practiced them infrequently or not at all.[43] Below, the best practices for employing people with disabilities are summarized.

Recruitment:

- If resources are available, companies should actively recruit people with disabilities by reaching out to various agencies and groups within community.
- Hospitality companies should utilize employment agencies because they are a good source for pre-screened, qualified candidates with disabilities. They offer valuable services like on-the-job coaches to help during the training and initial evaluation process.
- Small and large companies alike should include disabilities in their corporate diversity plans because top management support is a driving factor for increasing the employment of people with disabilities.

Hiring:

- Employers need to acknowledge the impact of stereotypes and "take the 'dis' out of disability and focus on the abilities" of the candidates.[44]
- By realizing that the majority of accommodations are free or low-cost, hospitality companies will be less reluctant to hire people with disabilities.
- Human resources professionals should collaborate with union leaders in the event that a reasonable accommodation may alter the terms and conditions of employment. Companies that hire front-line employees based on physical

appearance should realize that customers favor companies that hire and accommodate employees with disabilities.
- While employees with disabilities may be limited in their ability to multi-task or complete cross-divisional work, advance planning of accommodations could allow employees with disabilities to easily work in different departments.
- Employers should develop or arrange benefit systems to prevent part-time employees with disabilities from losing eligibility for government support for medications.[45]

Retention:
- Develop a system for providing and monitoring accommodations to employees. To facilitate this, all managers in hospitality organizations should be required to undergo accommodation training.
- Ensure transportation systems are in place so employees can get to and from work. Examples of transportation accommodations include creating a car pooling system or even subsidizing the cost of alternative transportation.
- Employers should aim to create an inclusive work environment that values all of the members of the organization.

Advancement:
- Managers should ensure all employees are aware of promotional opportunities. This includes ensuring information about promotions are accessible.
- Human resources professionals should view all employees, regardless of disability, the same, and should not assume who will or will not want the opportunity to advance.
- Employers should also not make assumptions about the abilities of disabled employees but should instead work to actively determine both the strengths and limitations of these employees.
- As with other jobs, human resources professionals should evaluate promotional opportunities to determine their essential functions, in order to broaden to scope of who can be considered for these advancements.

Best Practices of Hospitality Leaders: There are a few hospitality companies that act as leaders in the industry when it comes to employing individuals with disabilities. The DiversityInc Top Ten Companies for People with Disabilities 2011 has two hospitality companies—Sodexo (a food service company) and Starwood Hotels and Resorts. Ranking #9 on the list, Sodexo includes a large percentage of disability organizations in its philanthropic endeavors. In addition, their training and mentoring

programs are "highly attuned to cultural competence for an inclusive organization, including people with disabilities." Starwood, ranked #10, also includes numerous disability organizations in its philanthropy and has an active disability resource group for employees.[46]

Marriott International's Bridges from School to Work was founded by the Marriott Foundation for People with Disabilities as a program to help young people with disabilities to transition out of high school special education and into entry-level positions. The program acts as an employment agency and helps more than one thousand young adults find jobs every year. While this program does not necessarily place employees into the Marriott Corporation, it serves as an example of how dedicated hospitality companies can be in promoting the employment of people with disabilities.[47]

Professional Development for Human Resources Professionals

Professional development for human resources professionals will be vital to increasing employment opportunities for people with disabilities. Human resources professionals will need training on strategies for successfully recruiting, accommodating, retaining, and advancing individuals with disabilities.

The first step towards increasing the numbers of people with disabilities in the hospitality industry will be training human resources professionals on how to target and recruit individuals with disabilities. Human resources professionals also need to be trained in the importance of utilizing job boards and publications that target people with disabilities during recruitment. Information on how to develop relationships with organizations that help to facilitate the employment of people with disabilities, such National Statler Center, will help to increase recruitment avenues. The importance of accessible job postings and materials should also be part of the training. In recruiting, human resources professionals should see the recruitment of people with disabilities as just another part in attaining the diverse workforce that companies are always striving for.

A basic understanding of the accommodation process should begin with human resources professionals understanding their obligations under the Americans with Disabilities Act. More importantly, they need to understand what the process of providing accommodations may entail. Organizations that assist with the employment of individuals with disabilities (e.g., employment agencies) could facilitate training sessions. This training should provide case scenarios of accommodation situations and walk through the key issues and approaches to providing successful accommodations. Human resources professionals should also be aware of resources that are available to them as they accommodate employees, including the Job

Accommodation Network (JAN) and the Employee Assistance and Resource Network (EARN) at Cornell University.א

Kelly Donnelly is a January 2012 graduate with a B.S. from the School of Hotel Administration at Cornell University and earned a concentration in Human Resources. She previously served as Treasurer for Cornell Union for Disability Awareness. Ms. Donnelly looks forward to pursuing a career in human resources or diversity and inclusion.

Jeffrey Joseph is a student at Cornell University, pursuing a B.S. in the School of Industrial and Labor Relations.

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