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BUSINESS OF INCLUSION

# Service with a smile, and the best of ability

How Lemon Tree Hotels is scaling up its inclusivity initiative to audacious levels

CHITRA NARAYANAN

As you enter the spanking new Lemon Tree hotel in Sector 60, Gurugram, a young bearer, Gugan, greets you with a tray of water and a smile. When you thank him, he points to the note around his neck, which says he is speech- and hearing-impaired. Guests are requested to write down their requests to him.

At the front desk, Shailender swiftly checks in guests with only occasional help from his colleague. He lost the ability to hear and speak when he was just six, but finished his studies and picked up a sales job before graduating to the hotel's reception area. Ring for tea in your room and you meet Sulekha, who was rescued by an NGO after she faced abuse from the home where she was employed as a domestic help. The NGO placed her with the hotel chain.

For a decade now The Lemon Tree Hotel Company has been hiring people with disabilities. Of its 4,500 employees spread across 40 hotels in 23 locations, over 13 per cent are differently-abled. Four years ago, it began hiring people from economically and socially weak backgrounds as well and they add up to another seven per cent.

But at its newly opened three-building complex in Sector 60 Gurugram, which houses a Lemon Tree, a Red Fox and a giant convention centre, it has taken this initiative to audacious lengths. When recruitment is complete, 70 per cent of the staff here will be opportunity-deprived Indians (ODIs), which includes both people with physical handicaps as well as the economically weak. To make that possible, the entire complex has been made

universally accessible, which means every single area - from the front desk to the kitchens to the inner recesses - has been fitted with ramps where necessary, and signage with Braille, so that anybody can comfortably navigate these spaces.

### Preparing for the challenge

The infrastructure, as Kashaf Aziz, Regional Manager, and General Manager of the hotel, points out, is the easiest piece. The challenge when working with people with handicaps ranging from hearing impairment to autism is ensuring no communication gaps, and a smooth workflow, especially, in a highly service-oriented field such as hospitality.

For starters, it means intensive training for every single person. No employee at Lemon Tree gets confirmed unless he or she passes the Indian Sign Language course. "To become a manager, you need to not just pass but score over 85 per cent," says Aradhana Lal, Vice-President, Sustainability of the hotel chain. Set up across the company, the sign language training programme called Expressions is reinforced every month.

Over the years, Lal says, Lemon Tree has perfected a strategy, which she calls the 'seven pillar model'. Vision and Cascade is the first pillar, followed by setting up a dedicated resource, sensitisation, job mapping, partnerships, training and finally scaling up.

### From vision to scale

Lemon Tree hotels owes its vision of inclusivity to a chance encounter. As Patu Keswani, Chairman and Managing Director of the chain recalled during a recent gathering of



**Room for all** An employee affected by Down's Syndrome at a Lemon Tree hotel

senior hoteliers, like every other equal opportunity employer, his company too had hired a few speech- and hearing-impaired people. One day, however, Keswani had a surprise visitor. It was the mother of one of his specially-abled employees holding a wedding invitation card. She emotionally told him that thanks to his steady job, her son could now dream of supporting a family. Keswani checked with the NGO that had placed the boy and learnt that for many people with disabilities marriage was usually a mirage. That was the turning point for Keswani, who at once summoned his HR team and told them to study the feasibility of hiring a large number of people with disabilities. Within no time, the project moved from a "what if" stage and cascaded into a big initiative.

Lal, who was till then in sales and marketing, was moved to drive the

sustainability initiative. Sensitising every single employee is core to the initiative. "We don't want anyone to be treated as *'hai bechara'* ("poor thing"), and expect normal team behaviour," she says.

Job mapping is an important part of the programme. As Aziz explains, three years ago, alongside construction of the Lemon Tree Sector 60 hotel, they began to match abilities with functions. "We could put a wheelchair-bound person in finance, but not in maintenance, and so on," he says. Initially, the plan was to make the Sector 60 hotel a 100 per cent ODI-run property, but the job mapping revealed that many roles could not be filled. That still remains a distant goal.

Once the jobs are mapped, Lemon Tree reaches out to its NGO partners (Youth4Jobs, Dr Reddy's Foundation and Muskaan, among others) to

recruit, skill and groom candidates. "We currently have 18 partners," says Lal. There is a constraint, but. "Most of our NGO partners are in one city or at most two or three cities. But we are present in 23 cities. How do we build a network of partners across India to feed our requirement at a local level?"

Training and trial runs come next. While the hearing-impaired are hired first and then undergo normal induction and training, those with intellectual disabilities are first put on a six-month-long training. Special educators are roped in to teach them the tasks and terminologies. They undergo "one-on-one" training which could last six months to one year. "This is an opportunity for not just the trainee to learn but the supervisor as well," says Lal.

Along the journey, many tweaks were made to the workflow. For instance, at some restaurants, the guests write down the order. Now, technology is being deployed with a gadget placed at a table that lights up when orders are given. Then, shift timings were changed to suit those with Down's Syndrome who cannot be put on a night shift.

Business-wise the inclusivity drive has paid off. Aziz says the specially-abled are far more focused than others in repetitive tasks. Lal says retention levels among them are higher.

Now, Lemon Tree is implementing the final pillar, the big scale-up, and addressing career growth. Currently, none has reached managerial level though quite a few are supervisors and several have been singled out as high potential. "But it won't be too long before you see a specially-abled general manager at a Lemon Tree," proclaims Aziz confidently.