Q & A TALKING WITH ARADHANA LAL
Lemon Tree's VP Sustainability about special needs employees. 44
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HOW DOES LEMON TREE HOTELS MANAGE TO
ARADHANA LAL, Vice President leading the Sustainability Initiative at Lemon Tree Hotels, including people inclusion and diversity has a tough task ahead of her. The company’s strategy is to build an inclusive employee base with a goal to ultimately have Employees with Disabilities form 20 percent of total employees at Lemon Tree. Here are excerpts from an interview she gave BW Hotelier.

How does Lemon Tree approach recruitment and inclusiveness?

We have been doing this work of inclusion for ten years. We started in 2007 and at that time, it was done more as an experiment because Patu, our chairman, asked the HR colleagues, “what will happen if we have people with disabilities?” He wasn’t looking at it from a vision perspective at that time. The HR colleague said, we don’t know, but we can find out and we can try. On a trial basis they took a few people who were speech and hearing impaired. We learnt very quickly that it is essential to sensitize the rest of the team. You can’t just decide at the top that you want to bring in people with disability without sensitising.

We run sensitisation sessions repeatedly, the reason is that other team members change. There is normal attrition. Your other teammates may not be aware of how to deal with disabilities like autism. You can’t expect any staff members to work with someone with a disability, without knowing about the disability and how they should engage with the person who is challenged.
Tell me who you recruit for roles in the hotel?

In terms of recruitment, we started with deaf, ten years ago. After about two years, when we had recruited 20-25 people, we felt that this is working. First, the recruits wouldn’t leave. Secondly, they were also very energetic and focussed on their task, sometimes delivering more operational efficiency than others. One example is in housekeeping, normally, a room boy cleans about 16-17 rooms a day. The hearing impaired room boy clean 19-20 rooms a day. They are actually 15 percent more efficient.

Seven years ago, we began recruiting physically challenged candidates. We have employed people who are partially handicapped (without a limb), those who are wheelchair bound. We look at what it their qualification and then look for a fit in your vacancies. Education levels are pretty decent here. But we are very flexible about it.

About four years ago, we began employing people who were intellectually challenges, starting with candidates who had Downs Syndrome, then people with autism about two-and-a-half years ago. What is tricky with these candidates is, we don’t hire outright. We run a trainee-ship with the help of specialist educators and then make them understand their tasks and terminologies. It’s like you teach them hotel school, but in six to nine months. Then you see how well they have responded. There is physical work as well as interactive work, with colleagues and customers.

How does the training process happen for the physically challenged and the intellectually challenged?

In the case of hearing impaired and physically challenged, we just hire and make them go through the normal induction and training process. In that training, your teaching them their department, whether its front office or house
keeping for example. This is called a 101 training. That is the way all employees get trained in Lemon Tree. With the case of those with intellectual disability, we try to teach them the content of 101, but very simplified, without the use of the thick manuals. We don’t make them sit in a classroom for nine hours a day. We make them see some of the training videos and everything else is done literally standing with them in actual work environments, through demonstration and role play. It is displayed right in front. A very important part of teaching them is that you have to make them practice it.

Each month you need to review with them, while being mindful of every gain that takes place as well as every movement that doesn’t take place which means they are not being able to grasp the concept. We do this review with the trainee and their parents. With intellectual disability, the capacity to absorb so much information may be a little limited. This is the time we ask the parents to support certain behaviours and practice a bit at home. We found this combination of doing direct recruitment in the cases where its possible versus doing train and recruit works very well for us.

How many specially-abled people are employed by Lemon Tree Group at present?

The employee base, those who have been given a formal joining letter and are working here, number 550 people across the entire group—that’s 40 hotels in 23 cities—out of a total base of 4100 people, which makes it 14 percent. Out of the 550, between 400 to 425 are hearing challenged, that is our largest group. Around a 10 or 110 are physically challenged—it could be someone in a wheelchair, or with a missing limb. We have 14 people with either Down Syndrome or slow learners, who went through their trainee-ship and are now employed. We have one autistic staff member and two or three with low vision. In case of the visually challenged, we are not being able to hire right now because the software they use doesn’t match ours. We are solving this as we speak. We are also training four people with Down Syndrome who are not yet part of the 550 employees I have mentioned.

What about those who are economically or socially disadvantaged. Does Lemon Tree have a policy for them as well?

We began to work with people from the economically and socially weak segment around four years ago. Currently there are 310 employees, around 7.5 percent out of the 4100. These are people who can be orphans, widows, abandoned or
battered women. They could be a BPL card holder, belong to certain areas, like Bihar, Jharkhand, Chattisgarh, Orissa and the North East. We put a rider to this, which is that a person’s education should be incomplete.

They should not have been able to go beyond class nine, maybe because of economic reasons or social reasons, and therefore are disadvantaged as far as a job is concerned. This whole segment is called Opportunity deprived Indians. Under that, we have employees with disabilities and the segment is economically and socially weak. The total makes up around 20 percent of employees.

**How do you plan and increase these numbers?**

Every year, we set ourselves a target. This year we want to grow 550 to 700 and 310 to 400. Often, when opening new hotels, so those employees are also counted. But it often involves setting higher targets for each hotel as well. A lot of work has to go into deciding which department, which role is suited for a person of which disability. This process is called job mapping.

**How many people have you guys actually trained? Have you tracked the people who have left to see what they are doing now?**

Attrition happens a lot in the industry, with them it is a little less. We know where they go usually, in around 60 or 70 percent of the cases, at least immediately after they leave our employment. We would have had about 2,000 people go through us in the last ten years, but the count includes those who might have left in less than a month, because they don't settle into the work—it's never an issue with the attitude of a colleague. Many leave for jobs where salaries are double of what we give them, so it works out very well for them. It's also true beyond just the disability segment, but for our entire employee base. Every year as a company, we hire 1600 to 1700 people and we have 1500 to 1600 leaving as well.

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