

Ignorance of ability brings disability

It is a matter of chance and not choice, they do not need sympathy but empathy. Given the opportunity, differently-abled people (often addressed as people with disability) are no less than any other human being. In tune with this philosophy, the hospitality industry is working continuously to give opportunities to differently-abled people while contributing towards this social cause. Rashmi Pradhan reports

INDIA with more than one billion population, there is an estimated 70 million people, who are differently-abled people (DAP), which is seven percent of the total population. And in the years to come, the figures are expected to rise sharply. However, little has been done for the betterment of the disabled people. In 1995, right of the disabled people received a formal recognition from the Indian Government with the enactment of 'The Persons with Disabilities (Equal Opportunities, Protection of Rights and Full Participation) Act'. The Act granted general rights and privileges and has a special section on employment, wherein disabled people have guaranteed reservations in all government sector companies, poverty alleviation schemes and social security. Under the Act, centres have been set up across various states to promote and protect their interests. However, not much has been done to implement the Act. According to a survey conducted in 1999 by National Centre for Promotion of Employment for Disabled People it was revealed that the private sector employed a mere 0.28 per cent people with disabilities, while the public sector employed 0.54 per cent. Multinational Corporations hired only 0.05 per cent disabled people in India.

According to the guidelines issued by Ministry of Tourism, as far as the hospitality industry is concerned, facilities for the differently-abled guests: room with attached bathroom, designated parking, ramps for free accessibility in public areas and at least one restaurant, designated toilet (unisex) at the lobby level etc. All operational hotels will require to conform to the requirements by September 2010.

Hotels recruit DAP as a corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiative. ITC-Welcom group has employed about 215 DAP across its properties in India and through job, telephone operator, reservations, housekeeping, laundry and kitchen. Most of the hotel employs people with cerebral palsy, hearing and speech impairment, physically and visually challenged, dumb and deaf and some its supply chain. ITC-Welcom group under Welcom Environ's CSR initiative has issued disability handbook for the industry, which is available at ITC-Welcom group website (ITC neither endorses the contents nor takes any responsibility regarding the accuracy or effectiveness of the information provided in that hand book).

Niranjan Khatri, General Manager, Welcom Environ Initiatives, ITC Ltd said, "ITC-Welcom group in line with ITC's triple bottom-line philosophy initiates actions on the social, economic and environment issues. As part of its CSR initiative, we tried to bring people with disability to the main stream while respecting the dignity of the person." **Lemon Tree Hotels has employed around 70 DAP across its different properties. "These small efforts have been taken by the group to rehabilitate DAP in the best possible way. They are equal to other human beings and hence have all the rights, which any other human being enjoys," stated Sareena Kochar, General Manager-Housekeeping, The Lemon Tree Hotel Company. However, there are hotels which employs DAP but not at such large numbers.**

Recruitment and training of DAP

Depending upon the company policies, DAP are either hired on fixed term contract or on permanent basis. In some cases, institutes approach the hotels to recruit DAP whereas in certain cases, hotels approach NGOs. However, there are hotels which recruit DAP through the labour department since they are enrolled with the state labour department. Regular recruitment procedures are followed for employing them. Mostly, DAPs are offered back of the house jobs and desk jobs like paper supervision, computer also hire mentally retarded. They are usually recruited in

the regular shifts.

Nitin Deshpande, Vice President-Human Resources, Kamat Group of Hotel informed, "Firstly, we identify the skills of disabled people and accordingly recruit them to the respective department." Shiv Kumar Mehan, Area Director - Sarovar Hotels and General Manager - La Place Sarovar Portico, Lucknow added, "We prefer to recruit DAP in the department of their interest. So, they could increase their efficiency in their respective specialised fields." It is required to treat disabled staff with care and responsibility. Khatri stated, "While we allocate them to different departments, we also have to consider the safety of our employees. Most of the time, they are being assisted by the other staff." Educational background of DAP is also considered while they are recruited.

While the industry is trying its best to bring DAP in mainstream, it is crucial to treat them at par with other associates. "We want to give chance to DAP since they are also the part of the same organisation and hence there is no discrimination made," says Kochar. "Like any other staff, DAPs are also provided induction, orientation and training. While the other recruits are trained, DAP are also trained simultaneously. Since, they are required to work in tandem with other staff it is paramount to train them with others. Later, if required we counsel and brief them on how to behave with associates since they are not exposed to organisational set up and work culture," informed Salil Desai, Director-Human Resources, The Leela Kempinski, Mumbai. However, Anil Malik, General Manager, ITe Hotel, The Maratha Mumbai said, "It is also required to train (teach them sign languages) those associates who are in regular touch with disabled employees."

The Persons with Disabilities (Equal Opportunities, Protection of Rights and Full Participation) Act, 1995

The above Act was enforced on February 7, 1996. It provides for both preventive and promotional aspects of rehabilitation like education, employment and vocational training, reservation, research and manpower development. creation of barrier-free environment. rehabilitation of persons with disability, unemployment and establishment of homes for persons with severe disability.

Three per cent of vacancies in government employment shall be reserved for people with disabilities and one per cent each for persons suffering from:

- Blindness or low vision
- Hearing impairment
- Locomotor Disabilities and Cerebral Palsy

Suitable scheme shall be formulated for

- The training and welfare of persons with disabilities
- The relaxation of upper age limit
- Regulating the employment
- Health and safety measures
- Environment in places where persons with disabilities are employed

Sensitizing the staff'

In order to work in an organisation, a person should feel comfortable with its working environment, associates and company. While the DAPs are recruited and trained, it is very necessary to tune in the existing staff on do's and don't with people having disability. "It is important to sensitize the existing staff. The employees are instructed to behave in a normal way with the disabled staff and make way for their development. A couple of guidelines are issued to the employees. For instance, they are instructed not to discuss the disability of the respective employee," said Mehan. "It

is important to engage them mentally and physically, which will give them scope to overcome their disability," opined Deshpande. The fact has to be understood that it is a disability and not a disease. It is important to build and develop their self confidence. They should not get conscious about their disability. "They need support and cooperation and by not giving the same we handicap them further. We need to have extra patience while handling them since they might need more time to understand things. In fact, it is a learning process for both the parties," informed Mehan.

Development of DAPs

Disabled people are equally entitled to promotions. and other benefits. But after sometime, there might be limitations regarding promotions and hence, in that case, they are offered monetary benefits. Those hotels, which employs DAP have found that they are as efficient as other staffs. Their performance and behavior is at par with other associates. "We encourage them to participate in various cultural activities being conducted in the hotel and have seen positive response," revealed Desai.

A small effort from our side can make a difference to somebody's life. It will not cost much but an initiative and conscious effort can bring those in the mainstream. They require support and cooperation from every one. An opportunity should be given to them, besides motivation and encouragement.

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