

Under the lemon tree



A GROUP OF HOTELS IN INDIA TAKES A BIG LEAP FOR ABILITY BY EMPLOYING — AND ESTABLISHING AN INCLUSIVE, EQUAL OPPORTUNITY WORK CULTURE FOR — STAFF MEMBERS WITH DISABILITIES

TEXT & PHOTOS: SHIVANI MOHAN

Devender Singh, 28, cheerful and ever-smiling, has a sparkle in his eyes as he mans the front desk of Lemon Tree Premier Hotel, Aerocity, New Delhi. He is athletic, left-handed and dreams of heading a hotel like the one he works in, some day.

Azad, 24, tall and well-built, is one of the most positive and gregarious team members working in the coffee shop of

the same hotel. He is funny, extroverted and is known for a special connect with the guests, always ready for a celebration or a party. Maya Kumari, 24, works at the housekeeping desk, taking calls from the rooms on any amenities the guests might want replenished, always polite and calm, making sure that each guest is satisfied. She left her earlier call centre job for this one, as she envisages growth here, and aspires to soon move to a position where she can be face to face with guests. She strives to be independent, and has no marriage plans as yet.

Devender, Azad and Maya comprise a special category of employees at Lemon Tree Hotels in India, called EWDs (Employees with Disabilities).

When Maya's uneducated parents moved to Delhi from Bihar years ago, they were worried about her, as she had lost sensation in one of her legs from being given the wrong medication at the mere age of two. Today, Maya, a graduate, commutes to work by local bus and goes everywhere on her own. Her work mantra is, "You should compete with yourself, not with anyone else."

Devender's right arm had to be amputated when he was five, due to a case of neglected septicaemia. He feels being left-handed by birth made it easier for him to adapt to not having his right arm. He says, "I don't feel bad about anything. I am really happy. Sometimes if I try to help a guest with his luggage, they hesitate. But I enjoy doing my duty and assisting them," adding, "If I were not disabled, I would probably be in the army. But even now, with hard work I feel I can do anything."

Rahul Pandit, president and executive director, Lemon Tree Hotels, is eloquent in explaining the ethos behind this initiative of employing people with disabilities across the group. He says, "We are all born with expiry dates. When we go up, God, for sure, won't ask if we met our IRR or growth numbers! We wanted to share and give back to society in a meaningful way and promote true inclusiveness." Today, 7 per cent of the 3,000-strong workforce of Lemon Tree Hotels, i.e. over 200 employees, is hearing and speech impaired. They are on target to increase this representation to 10 per cent over the next quarter.

How difficult was it for the group to get into this uncharted territory? Rahul says, "Starting this initiative in 2007, we encountered passive resistance from within. Our general managers had apprehensions if this demographic could be as productive. However, after a year of intense training and service and process redesign, we were successful in delivering equivalent service levels across this integrated workforce."

Under the aegis of the initiative known



TEAM OF SOLIDARITY: Azad (centre) enjoys his birthday celebration with fellow Lemon Tree employees in the hotel's coffee shop

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as Project Sankalp, they employed EWDs in the 'heart of the house' areas i.e. laundry, gardening, housekeeping etc, to start off. But they were gradually moved to 'front of the house' as well, where they now serve in the restaurants.

This year, two of their Speech and Hearing Impaired (SHIs) colleagues are to be promoted to departmental executive positions where they will start supervising their shift functions.



POSITIVE OUTLOOK: Devender Singh in the lobby of Lemon Tree Premier, Aerocity, New Delhi

Fresh, spirited and youthful, the Lemon Tree Hotel Company is India's fastest growing chain of upscale, mid-scale and economy hotels. Founded in September 2002 by Patanjali (Patu) Keswani, the group is known for innovative concepts. Walk into any Lemon Tree and you are greeted with warm, citrus colours, fuss-free interiors and a strong lemongrass aroma that wakes up your senses. The senior managers earn their ponytails and tie them up with cute yellow bows. There are quirky jokes framed and put up in the washrooms (anti-men in the ladies and anti-women in the men's!). There is a resident pet dog (yes, a real one) in almost every Lemon Tree hotel. Project Sankalp perhaps emerged from this inherent 'do things differently' ethos of the group.

Rahul says, "We are delighted and eager to drive this movement across our three brands in 15 cities and 25 hotels. This demographic has now become an alternate talent pool for the company. In the present times, while there is a struggle to find good people, 21 million disabled people in India have hardly any lifestyle and vocation choices. We are now working towards including socio-economically disadvantaged citizens too, to create a diverse, inclusive culture as we work towards our goal of operating 40,000 rooms over the next 10 years."

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Disabled people die almost 10 years earlier in India than in other countries, partly for lack of opportunities

The group collaborated with Arun Rao of the Deaf Way Foundation and Meera Bhatia of Sai Svayam, to design their teaching, sensitisation and feedback curriculum including workplace safety practices – like giving whistles to all EWD employees to attract attention and help in an emergency.

Speaking of the synthesis process, Rahul says, “Sensitisation of employees has been the most intense part of the exercise. Today, our general managers and department heads are taught Indian sign language. Now we’re also teaching it to colleagues at the corporate office. One of our chief operating officers said our meetings will be shorter and more effective if we speak in sign language!”

What is the one quality they look for while selecting EWDs? “Attitude,” says Rahul, going on to talk about his executive assistant, Shubham, who is 100 per cent visually impaired, very bright, and an MBA. He is a big fan of Salman Khan movies, wears an ear-stud and goes to the gym every day.

Nikhil Sharma, Assistant Vice President, Operations, who has more hands-on experience with EWDs says, “After initial teething problems, we realised they wanted a sense of community. We try to have 8-10 EWDs in any unit so they don’t feel alienated. Then they start interacting better with the “abled” staff who also need to be sensitised to their needs. Then it’s an absolute delight to watch them blossom and grow.”

Nikhil adds, “It is not just a source of employment we are creating in their life, but hopefully changing their whole life. Do you know disabled people die almost 10 years earlier in India than in other countries? It is because they are ostracised socially, lack opportunities and are discriminated against by their closest kith and kin. With an income, they get a sense of pride and accomplishment.”

Today, he says, all their employees are richer in terms of experience and learning, interacting with EWDs. The group has believed in adapting and facilitating EWDs in every way. Nikhil related an interesting incident: “Once we noticed that they all used Chinese mobile phones. We soon found out it was for



FACE OF AMBITION: Maya Kumari works in housekeeping and aspires to rise in the ranks at Lemon Tree

video calling. They all call each other and probably chat more than us! So we put up computers in the hotel’s back areas, so that they can communicate through skype with their colleagues!”

The SHIs, such as Azad, carry a card with them that they provide guests and request them to scribble their food orders on – a simple solution to a not-

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Project Sankalp perhaps emerged from the inherent ‘do things differently’ ethos of the Lemon Tree group



LEADING THE INITIATIVE: Rahul Pandit, President and Executive Director, Lemon Tree Hotels

so-complex problem. For incorporating orthopedically challenged staff, the hotels widened the doorways everywhere so that wheel-chairs could pass through easily. Other than these little personalised touches, all the staff share the same locker rooms, and follow the same set of rules.

Rahul Pandit and his team of dynamic young directors do not want to sit on their achievements and laurels just yet. The group has ambitious plans, including a new hotel in Gurgaon which will be staffed almost entirely by EWDs. With a look of great hope in his eyes, Rahul says, “We are confident of accomplishing this unique endeavour and becoming the first hotel to be manned by close to 100 per cent EWDs and socio-economically marginalised individuals.”

What has been the guests’ reaction? “Our guests are delighted by the service levels by EWDs at our hotels. I think this initiative engenders a sense of pride, which in its own small manner is Lemon Tree’s contribution to nation building. We are regularly motivated by guest feedback and get repeat customers due to this, on our internal feedback forms or on social media forums like TripAdvisor.” The group sources EWDs from various NGOs besides the Vocational Rehabilitation Centre for Disabled People, run by the Ministry of Labour & Employment, Government of India.

EWDs are recruited, trained and evaluated using specific processes created for them. Besides SHI employees, they are also recruiting the Orthopedically Handicapped (OH) now. Rahul sums up, “We are an equal opportunity employer. All colleagues are treated at par; there is no disparity in salaries.” **W**

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