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Industries:

Unique Challenges and Opportunities in Hospitality

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Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Challenges and Opportunities in the Hotel Industry

By Angella Reid

Women are disproportionately represented in lower skills and lower paying jobs in the Hotel Industry such as Housekeeping. Women are underrepresented in the kitchen, engineering and security.

Could looking at Room Attendants potentially be a way to identify, develop, upskill and promote more women in the hotel industry?

Background

Nothing repels guests more than poor **housekeeping**. A **hotel's** cleanliness immediately sets the tone for quality and good **housekeeping** provides a surefire way to enhance the guest experience and improve a hotel's bottom line.

*According to the Bureau of **Labor Statistics**, more than 88 **percent** of hotel housekeepers are **women**, and more than 67 **percent** are people of color. Mar 2, 2021.*

There are historical structural and cultural issues which determine the roles that women play within the hospitality workforce, and which impacts their status and opportunities within the industry. It is time to remake the people strategy model of how hotel industry is operated.

As we are working our way out of the pandemic the service industry is experiencing severe shortages in labor. There are varied opinions about why folks are not running back to their old jobs. Is that due to extended and enhanced unemployment benefits? Or, is it the fact that those jobs are more physically challenging than is worth the low pay? Or perhaps, especially for women, the child care solutions are unavailable due to the pandemic? I do think, however, that this so called "pandemic pause" has allowed employees to take stock of the jobs from which they were laid off or furloughed, having used the time to re-evaluate the value of effort/compensation ratio. Never before in my lifetime have we had the opportunity to step back from work and assess out jobs without feeling pressured.

This unplanned sabbatical demands that both employers and employees make some shifts in their norms to meet the demands of the new economy. But not every industry can play in the remote and gig economy field. Hospitality is one of those that requires face to face engagement to achieve its full service intentions and expectations.

I don't want to be served by a robot when I visit a hotel; I would rather stay home. I might possibly select a "robot led" hotel specifically if I wanted that experience, but generally speaking, I like the human touch.

With this pandemic pause comes the sure fallout of women leaving the hospitality industry for the age old societal expectations of them being the ones to first step into the child-care and caregiver role. This will undoubtedly set back the closure of the gender equality gap that we have been pursuing for many years. This shift is also going to negatively influence the rise of women to leadership roles in the hotel industry as they consider other job opportunities or simply remain home.

So, it got me thinking about how we can reshape and switch our paradigm around women generally employed in poorly perceived, lower economic status jobs such as Housekeeping in a hotel.

We do not need to look very far to find a ready supply of future hospitality leaders we can tap into to grow the pipeline of future leaders.

The hospitality industry does not suffer from a lack of female representation...on the contrary...it suffers from an overabundance of women at low levels with little or no focus on a plan to develop and lift them up. This is what ails the industry.

According to Julia Campbell, founder of [Women in Hospitality \(WOHO\)](#), in 2017, the hospitality sector workforce was composed of 55.5% of women but still dominated by men in managerial positions. In the [Castell project inc. report 2019](#), only 11% of hotel company leadership positions (i.e., managing director, president, partner, CEO) are held by women. They go on to suggest that the odds of a woman reaching a top leadership position, are one woman to eight men.

I launched my hotel career directly out of high school and had no idea that it would become my life's career and passion. I rose in the ranks because of early years mentorship and a conviction that I would work harder and more efficiently at whatever I chose to pursue. I consistently demonstrated to key stakeholders and outside influencers a "can do" attitude, being a quick study and showing the commitment to put in the time. I believed in myself, and people believed in me, investing their time and knowledge to guide my journey to success. Of course, there were times when I lost faith in whether I could be any good at rising in the ranks of a hotel and each time I talked myself off the ledge, determined never to wallow in self-pity nor be crushed by the weight of failures and criticism of others.

It is an industry I love and have benefited from, one to which I have made invaluable contributions and which has contributed to my own success. I made it a point to gain on the job experience at the Front Desk, Housekeeping, HR, Engineering, Food & Beverage (F&B), because I wanted to understand the whole model. I never wanted to be labelled a Rooms or F&B person but a generalist. Along this journey I grew to understand the impact of the work of our Housekeepers. I have seen firsthand the crap they encounter in rooms, the carts they push from floor to floor, the pressure they face when Front Desk says they need the room

rushed, etc. Backbreaking work! Somehow though not many rise through the ranks to become senior leaders. I think there are various reasons why. For me, two reasons are evident. First, housekeepers generally prefer to stay in the background as they often don't feel equal to those who serve in the front of house; Second, the bright stars often don't wish to move into leadership because they feel they will work longer hours with less opportunity for overtime when they become "exempt," and because they are usually the breadwinners in their families, they need to earn incremental income from "buying rooms" (i.e., being paid for cleaning a number of rooms over and above their assigned daily quota) and doing overtime when possible.

Room Attendants have traditionally been females, often females from lower income backgrounds, who often do not speak the native tongue, English, fluently, and often they have families to support. Women who I knew in Housekeeping often felt their jobs were less dignified when compared to employees who worked in the front of house. How many hotels demonstrate to Room Attendants the true value they bring to the success of a hotel by investing in their development? We more often focused on how we can improve their productivity.

Flipping the Switch

Maybe it's time to "flip the switch" and focus more on the development and growth of female housekeepers to leadership positions.

And, in my opinion I believe that here is a group that could be tapped for consideration of future leadership roles by identifying the star performers, with natural leadership abilities, and aspirations, creating opportunities for them to have a structured learning model, possibility to split their time between housekeeping and front of house rotations within their hotels, and exposing them to mentors that can help them build confidence and decision making skills.

Finding the nuggets, honing and polishing them may not be the silver bullet for solving the low representation of women in leadership in hotels but it is a surefire way to tap into the pool of women already in hotels. Oftentimes I hear the complaint, "We don't have women because there are no women applying." Women are in Housekeeping in spades!

Here is a group of predominantly female employees who are accountable for the fundamental product and service of a hotel, and who are rarely afforded the opportunity to break out of this mold, to learn, grow and rise in the organization. And I ask, why not move someone up to recognize just how valuable they are, increase their engagement and role modeling for others to follow?

It is a fact that it is far more acceptable for a male restaurant server, for example, to work through the ranks to become a Supervisor/Manager/Division Leader and General Manager

than it ever will be for a female Housekeeper to do the same. The typical male employee is in my opinion the ones that become poster children when they rise in the ranks. They are heaped with praise and lauded for how they worked their tails off to become ultimate leaders. Well, women, when invested in at the same level and given the same trust and guidance can be equally ambitious and work just as hard to rise in the ranks, but somehow women are often kept in traditional female jobs limiting their exposure to diverse experiences and limiting their opportunity to contribute. This I believe is hinged on the fact that no matter how well-meaning we are, we put housekeepers in a stereo typical box of limitations rather than remove the barriers to entry and encourage them to aspire for greater responsibilities. When leadership at the corporate level reflects more of an equal gender split, then will we also see the female corporate leaders mentoring, advising, and befriending female mid-level managers.

Industry Challenge

Site studies now show that currently 70% of hotel school graduates are women compared to less than 50% 15 years ago.

The challenge to the industry is to rethink and remodel the role of gender diversity in the hotels while elevating the value a traditionally accepted female role such as Room Attendant brings to the table, making it known that they too can become the next Rooms Division or F & B Director. Market the Room Attendant positions in such a way that it is not seen as a dead end job in hotels; one that bears the brunt of the physical and exhausting work in a hotel but rather a steppingstone to broader opportunities.

We need to remove the stereotypical gender silos we have encouraged for years; one is either a Rooms or Food & Beverage person staying in the same discipline one's entire career until achieving a general senior leadership role such as Hotel Manager or General Manager.

There is a saying that "what gets focused on, gets accomplished!" It is therefore possible that with a plan for investment in Housekeepers it is possible to deliver women to the leadership funnel more effectively.

Along my journey I experienced and witnessed the higher level of trust in men's ability to do certain jobs in the hotel as opposed to women. Men just seemed to have more decision makers who look like them and therefore gravitate to their own gender not because they were better at the job but because they were viewed from the point of reference of an individual who seemed to identify more with like mindedness. It's societal, we cannot be what we cannot see and though it is changing, the change needs to move at a more rapid pace.

What does it mean to lose women in the workplace?

A record number of women have left and will continue to leave the US workforce during the COVID-19

crisis. A policy expert and former HR executive discuss the long-term effects—and their own experiences.

For women who were in the service industry and have a lower socio-economic status, I'm worried that they may not get employed again. Because when we look at the intersection of the pandemic with automation, we see that a lot of these jobs were already on the chopping block. Unless we have a robust reskilling and retooling program that's put forward, I'm really worried that a chunk of women with lower-socio economic status may not be able to find stable employment again.

This is going to have long-term implications. It's not just about right now or the next quarter or the next set of quarters. This is about a decade or two. From McKinsey article: What We Lose When We Lose Women in the Workforce.

The hospitality industry is traditionally one that demands huge time commitments and often the rationale has been because we serve customers all hours of the day. I call BULLS#@ on that! I bought into that as a junior employee and even when I became a senior leader. I adapted my approach to meet with an evolving corporate policy that started to move towards a flexible work week for Sales Leaders especially because much of their work was “face to face” with customers in the marketplace and not necessarily in a hotel. And with that came the feeling by those not in the field that they were being treated unfairly not having similar choices extended to them. And in my opinion, the pandemic has shot that all to pieces and now the need to expand flexible work policies will determine success or failure. This past year has allowed everyone to have the time to re-evaluate what matters most to them: family care giving, remote working options, compensation transparency, performance evaluation methodologies, skill development, promotion pathing, less time spent at work, mental health and well-being..

We have been socialized in this industry to believe that face time is currency and in many respects it is,, but not in all. We need to build a new model that does not seek to pigeon hole employees into either Rooms or F&B but makes it possible for those who wish to experience the other departments have it built into their schedule to do so. Is that expensive? Yes. Will it lead to higher employee engagement, less turnover and positive impact on the bottom line? I believe absolutely yes! During my career, the hospitality industry has been characterized by poor work-life balance and high turnover rates. And yet, work life balance was one of the most talked about topics.

Think about it: hotel housekeepers report lower levels of satisfaction than other hospitality workers in terms of work-life balance, pay, relationships with managers, useful and interesting work. Housekeepers play an important role in hotel quality and guest satisfaction. And, as such, understanding and addressing factors contributing to job satisfaction and upward mobility for hotel housekeepers is critical for operators.

I believe that a focused, intentionally designed, value-based recruitment and development

program for housekeepers will help close the gap of women in not only middle management but ultimately even senior leadership positions in the hotel industry.

Thoughts on How to Begin Intentional and Incremental Change: Two Sided Challenges Require Two Sided Efforts

Before we launch into a list of suggested improvements that hotel operators can implement and actions that women can take to help their advancement, it is important to recognize that women in hospitality and Room Attendants might face anxiety and insecurity when considering career advancement. It is critical that hoteliers make these opportunities worth the effort for women in general and Room Attendants in particular. This will require clear communications about the investment to be made by hotel operators and the investment in time and effort required by female employees to be considered for advancement. Second, it will be critical to provide a clear understanding of the potential return on this investment for both of these parties. Hotel operators will need to consider fair and transparent pay policies, flexible work policies (to support these women's "caregiver" responsibilities), educational opportunities, hiring additional staff, and adjusting often farfetched expectations of productivity, among other things. Female employees will need to understand the pay structures at advanced levels (especially the differences between positions that are exempt and non-exempt from overtime pay), productivity and overtime expectations, and educational and training requirements.

Now let's look at a list of considerations for hotel operators and female employees that can improve advancement opportunities for women in hospitality.

Hotel operator considerations:

- Adjusting the norms: recalibrate; change course; this is the perfect opportunity to make radical moves because the workforce demands it.
- Create intra-organizational mobility for those women who aspire to learn and grow; many hotel brands now have multiple hotels in a city. Make it possible for housekeepers and other low skilled workers to have the same opportunities for movement as occurs at mid and senior management levels.
- Create more job-sharing roles.
- Establish formal mentoring and sponsorship programs.
- In my experience when we have identified high performing/high potential Room Attendants and "empowered" them to self-inspect their rooms decreasing supervision, providing higher hourly compensation we determined that these Room Attendants were and are capable of greater advancement with mentorship and education.
- Remake the Workplace – free up information flow; educate across the board.
- Create an environment in which women and girls see themselves reflected in all roles in a hotel and not just the traditional female roles such as Housekeeping; make it a focus to recruit and hire a woman in every single role.

- Strive to achieve a 50/50 split of male/female representation in your teams, right up to the executive team.
- Offering practical support such as childcare. And yes, this can prove expensive. It will help if leadership thinks and speaks of it as an investment in people which will return in multiples. Which is better economics...having guests in a poorly served environment leading to rebates and a public relations nightmare? Or figuring out childcare...a stipend, a joint unit for hotels in the same geographic area? It should not be a career killer for a woman to ask for extended leave because she wants to look after her children.
- Provide fair and transparent salary/wage information during an interview; abolish the cloak and dagger approach.
- Embed mental health resources in the workplace.
- Measure the value of employees based on results and performance and not on the number of hours of face time.
- Education- mandate minimum expectations of training hours for all employees. Make unconscious bias training a part of the required annual training hours for each employee.
- Build diversity and inclusion into the workplace culture remembering it is more than gender and race.
- Leadership must clearly define the diversity statement and its culture of inclusion and recognition. And then bring it to life (*and I don't mean just cultural days where we prepare foods etc.*)
- Involve the employees in the work that affects them.
- Establish non-traditional training programs for Room Attendants and make the training a part of their shift hours so they don't need to spend additional at work to learn and grow while their families wait for the care they inevitably must provide.

What women can do to prepare themselves for advancement:

- Invest in a mentor or mentors. Don't wait for one to be assigned one. Seek out women and men you admire and ask them to support you. Be prepared for some discomfort in these discussions as there will and should be tough conversations that help you become more resilient.
- Learn from watching others and adapting the traits and skills that add value to your tool kit. Do not be afraid to steal shamelessly in this case.
- Speak up about your interests.
- Take risks. Say yes to the uncomfortable knowing you might fail. These uncomfortable journeys stretch us and teach us invaluable lessons. Don't settle for the comfy place – you will not grow.

- And when you fail, as you will on occasion, the most important thing is not to be crushed by that failure. Share these experiences with the mentors you trust and adapt the changes needed to keep moving forward. My self-talk was always “girl don’t wallow in self-pity, shake it off and get moving”.
- Use the power of networking. Networking, mentoring and coaching opportunities can help women build confidence and develop their careers. I benefited greatly from this and continue to do so.
- Take advantage of Mentoring Programs and be open to male mentors as well.

Summary

In conclusion, it is a fact that in the hotel industry the lack of women employees is not a legitimate concern, instead lack of upwardly mobile women is the case. I challenge us to think differently about Room Attendants as one way to begin to close this gap of women in leadership roles. Take action to select, hire, train and develop high potential Room Attendants to supervisory and managerial positions across hotel disciplines.

This is a role traditionally predominantly held by immigrant women, women of a minority race, women often with a low-level grasp of the English language and women who may have been forced to flee their home country to seek a better way of life and is seldom a role viewed as a pipeline for women leaders in the industry. And because of these factors which sometimes make them feel less recognized, they often do not, on their own, cultivate the confidence to boldly strive for roles they have the potential to take on.

As all industries grapple with selecting and promoting more women to senior positions, the hotel industry, a beneficiary of increased women travelers, already has a reservoir of female employees to tap into, and who can advance with some help from their leaders. I would like to stress that although I focus on Room Attendants the emphasis should be placed on developing women in whichever roles they occupy so they may continue to advance.

I view this investment as a win-win with the potential for huge benefits to Employee and Guest Engagement, a direct positive impact on the hotel’s bottom line. And in making the commitment to Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Belonging these actions are not only consequential they are the right thing to do.



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