

Equal Employment & Access for the Disabled in Hospitality

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Abstract

Data on the extent of disability among populations are difficult to compare internationally since different countries have different definitions of disability and disability levels, as well as different degrees of political willingness to publicize such information. In general terms a common definition of disability is “a physical or mental impairment which has a substantial and long term adverse effect on a person’s ability to carry out normal day to day activities (Stevens, 2002). It is estimated that disability affects 10 to 20 percent of every country's population, a percentage that is expected to grow because of rising populations with poor health care, improper nutrition during childhood, a growing elderly population and violent civil conflicts (World Bank, statement by World Bank President James D. Wolfensohn in the Washington, 2006), and employment related accidents or unfortunate incidents/accidents. It is one of the prime responsibilities of Human Resource Management to deal with those that are disabled and to effectively meet dictated levels of employment to assure an equal opportunity for all, especially those that are disabled.

Although, it is the responsibility of all national governments to care for the well being of their citizens, especially those disabled among their population, we might come across news such as “According to the Ministry of Labor Wednesday, companies paid more penalties last year than the previous year for failing to meet a 2-percent job quota for the disabled.” This for the most part comes from most company’s inability to meet the needs of the disabled employee to obtain equal facility access. It, however, remain that a disability is a health issue, not a political concern (Ustun, et al., 2001), though in many instances it has been politicalized.

The rights or distinction of the handicap was slow in becoming a recognized need by national governments, even though it was it started in the 1880s with Germany instituting the first general disability programs (Dixon & Hyde, 2000). It was over 50 years later (1935) before the United States began to recognize the needs of the disabled, even though they are seen as championing the cause.

In Turkey, where this study was conducted, according to the last survey conducted by State Statistics Institution (2002) there are 8,500,000 disabled people, which constitute 12.29 % of the whole population. However, only 140,000 disabled people are recorded with the Prime Minister Administration for Disabled People. There is no data to show how many disabled people are working or where they work or where they need access and are denied

due to their disability. Many of the countries that now laude that they have programs for the disabled (163 countries), have no idea just how many people within their country boundaries actual have some degree of disability. But, were we to conjecture that 12% to 15% of the world's population have some form of disability, we are talking about between 790 million to 1 billion people, a staggering figure. Further, all of the countries of the world are now trying to expand their potential share of the tourism market, including Turkey.

Due to the fact that the hospitality industry is a major employer it's only right that they exemplify the application of compliance with equal employment and equal access for the handicapped. Likewise, the hospitality facilities need to be built or structured to afford the handicapped free movement and easy access to most of the hotel amenities and areas of personal hygiene and certainly safety egress.

This study was conducted to determine a) if, in a general sense, Turkish hospitality employment policy is affording the handicapped equal opportunity and b) how the Turkish hospitality industry is living up to the hosting of disabled guests. The paper assesses compliance with regards to existing requirements and to make recommendations to improve the system.

The research was conducted at 4 and 5 star hotels in two cities (Ankara-the capital city and Marmaris – one of the most crowded summer tourist populations). By the Turkish Labor Law employers are required to employ at least 3% disabled people, if they have 50 or more employees. Therefore, only hotels with more than 50 employees were included in the study. The data were collected primarily from hotel Human Resources Managers (for staff) and Front Office Managers (for guests) through interview schedules. Moreover, authorities from the Prime Minister Administration for Disabled People were interviewed. Data were analysed by using qualitative and quantitative data analysis techniques.

Results show that by complying with the requirements the Turkish hospitality industry will tap into a reliable and loyal human resource, as well as enhance their ability to service an existing clientele that in the past have been overlooked. This equates to two favourable outcomes, that being increased profit from a relatively loyal client, but much more important, doing what is right. A society can be judged by how they treat those among them who are least able to take care of themselves.

Human Resource Management is the front line that has the opportunity to place emphasize on this important matter and it is to them that this study directs its findings. With the growing Hospitality Industry which now is projected to have a facility grow by 55% in the Asian/Pacific region and even 29% in North America in just the next five years (Koumelis, 2004) a special effort needs to be made to assure that the facilities meet or exceed the needs of the handicap.

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