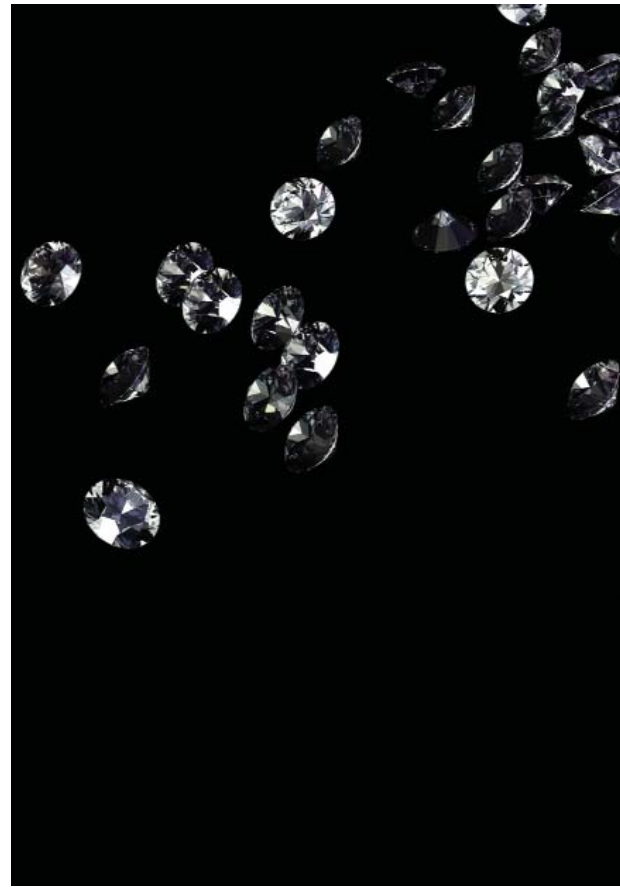


Hidden treasures

The growing disability talent pool has much to offer the hospitality sector in terms of talent, skills and proven loyalty. Specialist hospitality disABILITY adviser, **Michael McGrath** asks why it still remains such a well kept secret.



We know that the people of Europe come from a wide range of cultures. We know it's important to have employees with diverse talents and backgrounds. We know that in order to benefit from the full wealth of skills, abilities and ideas, it's crucial that the inclusion of disabled people is not just recognised and talked about, but fully realised and acted upon. We know that there is a skills shortage, so why isn't our industry profiting from difference, why isn't it taking advantage of this under-utilised pool of talent?

As an inclusion advocate, you'll know that I'm talking about the idea that human beings should freely, openly and happily accommodate any other human being that happens to be 'differently-abled', without question or qualification. Conscious of changing global demographics, spending patterns and consumer choice, plus the need for operators to link commitment to disability to defined business priorities and the changes

in disability legislation, just how disability confident is our industry?

A named expert in Euromoney's Guide to World Leading Employment Lawyers and partner for law firm DLA Piper, Jonathan Exten-Wright, said that "constant competition in the hospitality sector for employees and guests means no business should miss out on the opportunity to recruit disabled employees and serve disabled guests".

With the measureable impact on brand reputation, attraction, retention and employee loyalty, the vital ingredient in making that lasting difference when recruiting disabled workers is leadership. Organisations need to ensure that high level diversity strategies explicitly aim to realise the potential for disabled people to contribute to business performance.

"In today's business world, the key competitive advantage is talent.

Winston Churchill once said:
"A pessimist sees the difficulty in every opportunity; an optimist sees the opportunity in every difficulty."



There should be no constraints on our search for talent. As business leaders we should do everything necessary to attract, develop and retain people who can make a significant contribution to the bottom-line," said John Varley, group chief executive for Barclays plc and president of the Employers' Forum on Disability.

After China and India, Europe is the world's third largest population with some 457 million people. An estimated 10 per cent of these people are disabled – a group that is nine times the population of Denmark, or five times that of Belgium.

For the hospitality industry, confidence in employing more disabled people will not only require leadership and drive, but importantly will also require an acceptance to change organisational thinking and employment practices. To succeed, operators must challenge the negative assumptions regarding the capacities of workers with

disabilities. They must possess a real boardroom desire to want to disability-innovate. One of the classic definitions of innovation comes from Harvard Business School which defines it simply as a "creative idea that is realised", whilst the UK's Department for Business Enterprise and Regulatory Reform (DBERR) defines innovation as "the successful exploitation of new ideas". Employing talented disabled people is not a new idea, so why is it still a well kept secret?

When looking at global Fortune 500 companies or FTSE 100 businesses, disability is now an established element of excellent HR practice, usually as part of a wider strategic diversity plan. Organisations that are confident in this area have accountability and shared commitment, robust policy foundations, a focus on inclusive behaviours and cultures and an open, collaborative style that actively engages with its disabled consumers; your disabled guests.

Underpinning all these elements is the need for a strong commercial plan that seeks to provide accessible services and products.

There are too few industry examples where businesses are creating 'real tangible value' by successfully leveraging difference. There are some exciting new positive initiatives including for example En Passant's 'One and All Foundation' that is working in partnership with People 1st and The Prince's Trust. The Foundation aims to encourage the development of 'today's talent and tomorrow's leaders', especially those who face barriers to progression.

In most cases, the only barriers are those we choose to accept; barriers that, for example, one in six disabled people throughout Europe have to face every day of their lives, irrespective of whether they're in work, want to work or can't work. It's time for operators to raise the bar, diversify their pool of employees and reap the rewards.

Organisations recognise that diversity and

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John Varley, Barclays.



inclusion are business imperatives, rather than optional business activities. Despite the fact that most organisations acknowledge the business drivers, many are pursuing diversity action plans that have little impact on the real issues facing them. The business case for diversity in the UK is undeniable.

“With 2012 drawing ever nearer, the hospitality sector, now more than ever before, is challenged with engaging and nurturing talent from all sections of society to ensure the industry is in a healthy shape in time for the Games,” said Robin Derrett, vice president, HR, Hilton UK & Ireland.

Part of this process is communicating examples of industry best practice more readily. The industry needs more ‘champions’ and ‘role models’, but also more support, not just in recruiting disabled workers but in providing tailored development programmes to those disabled people in work.

At an organisational level, research studies in the hospitality industry have identified that in terms of people development programmes, the primary barriers appear to be a lack of financial support, existing work pressures and limited training budgets.

A study by Oxford Brookes revealed several barriers to ‘development’ including ignorance of the benefits of training, insufficient evidence linking training with improved business performance, an emphasis on short-term survival issues and the perception that training is expensive.

With this in mind and amidst the current

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economic climate, how on earth can leading providers of employment services for disabled people establish robust long-term relationships that help operators effectively leverage the growing disability talent pools that exist?

One leading expert in the provision of specialist employment services for disabled people has unrivalled relationships with a growing number of employers within the hospitality sector. In addition, they work closely with Jobcentre Plus. In 2007, Remploy placed over 6,600 disabled people into sustainable employment with many of the UK’s top employers such as BT, Asda and Christian Salvesen.

As part of Remploy’s drive to significantly increase the opportunities available to disabled people to find work both in the hospitality sector but also across other industry sectors, they have opened a network of over 20 city centre branches that also provide potential candidates with vocational skills development programmes. These offer advice and practical training on a number of work related topics, ranging from communication skills and confidence building to specific job-focused training.

It appears that despite this impressive resource, when compared to other business sectors our industry is losing out when it comes to recruiting employees from the indigenous population.

Stephen Dunn, corporate accounts manager at Remploy, said: “It’s surprising that much of the hospitality sector is missing out on an opportunity to place employees who have a proven track record of success, sustainability within a job, higher attendance levels and a strong work ethic”.

Remploy is successfully placing enthusiastic disabled candidates within our industry, but all too often on a piecemeal hotel-by-hotel basis with no formal centralised input. Some of the larger brands who notoriously have



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Stephen Dunn,
Remploy.

higher churn rates ought to know that in 2007, Remploy placed over 1,000 people into the hospitality and catering sector in every type of role from banqueting manager, receptionist, kitchen and waiting staff through to cleaning, housekeeping and maintenance.

Outside of the hospitality industry, Royal Mail, ASDA and BT are just three examples of large employers who have all seen the benefit of working with disabled employees and who have engagement recruitment programmes in place with Remploy that encourage and inform local and regional managers of current opportunities.

There is now considerable evidence to show that the disability talent pool offers a strong sustainable mix of core skills from individuals who have a great deal to offer the hospitality and catering industry, not least their loyalty. One example of best practice is fast food operator McDonald’s Restaurants who see working with Remploy as an integral part of their overall programme of ‘change and improvement’.

“Great employees give great customer service. They enhance the overall customer

experience by better sustainability and time at work”, said Stephen Dunn. “Our success with McDonald’s is as a result of our customer focused development programme that identifies the natural skills and attributes that candidates have, linking those to specific industry sectors,” he added.

ASDA is building this development programme into its regular recruitment plan. As a direct result, it is in a strong position to maximise the new Local Employment Partnerships (LEPs) that many in the sector have signed up to with the government. Remploy candidates count towards LEP agreements and allow companies to achieve those agreements with a business as usual agenda. “That’s of real business value to any company, especially those within the revenue driven hospitality and catering sector,” commented Dunn.

Candidates working through city centre Remploy branches get real exposure to business sectors with site visits and direct employer engagement. They fully understand the requirements of a specific employer and the realities of a job, whether working shifts or weekend/unsociable hours. “It all adds up to realistic job awareness with



no surprises, in turn leading to sustainable work that the employee enjoys and the employer benefits from," affirmed Dunn.

Remploy have worked with many operators including independent brewing and pub retailing business Marstons, a variety of Whitbread owned restaurant chains including Beefeater, as well as Malmaison, Marriott Hotels, InterContinental Hotels and Hilton Hotels UK & Ireland.

In the hospitality sector, "being part of a team and achieving in work are two positive aspects of the job that Remploy candidates regularly cite, in addition to being able to see the fruits of their labour, be that an immaculately prepared bedroom, or the smile of an appreciative customer who the employee has delighted", enthused Stephen Dunn.

One of the most engaging definitions of the concept of diversity that captured my attention came recently from an investment banker of a large city firm in London, who

defined it as "awareness that other people could think, feel, act, interact and respond differently from me". Knowledge and intellectual capital cannot be bounded by factors that exclude employees, clients or suppliers.

Disability is an issue which people care about a great deal. Unfortunately the majority is still unsure, perhaps afraid, of disability because they simply don't understand it, or because they think it has major cost implications. It is our inability to effectively deal with disability which is in itself disabling. Irrespective of disability, establishing enabling environments for all employees and guests is vital to the hospitality industry's growth and success.

In leveraging difference, it is time for the industry to take a more diverse approach. Perhaps most telling is when company surveys consistently conclude that UK organisations, having successfully employed disabled people, are keen to employ more. The secret is out! ■

Disability - the facts

- As the EU population gets older, the incidence of disability will increase – a group that will make up a significant economic part of the EU population.
- Statistics clearly show that you're either going to die young or acquire a disability in later life.
- In 2010 (just two years away), approximately 40% of the UK population will be over 45 years of age; the age at which the incidence of disability increases exponentially.
- 2% of the working age UK population becomes disabled every year.
- 78% of disabled people acquire their impairment aged 16 or older.
- A graduate with a work-limiting disability in the UK is more likely to want work than an unqualified person with no disability.
- 6% of first class honour degrees are gained by students known to have a disability.
- The employment rate for disabled people has risen from 38% to 48% in the past 10 years. It is however far behind the 74% of working aged adults in jobs in the UK. The Government wants to improve this.

What do **you** think?

Why with a reported skills crisis gripping the industry, is there still reluctance to embrace the talent and enthusiasm of 'differently-abled' persons? If you are a business putting ability before disability, how are you doing so? We'd love to hear from you. Please e-mail sophie@hospitalitymagazine.co.uk



David Fairhurst,
chief people officer,
McDonald's UK

"At McDonald's we have a unique approach to employment - we recruit staff on attitude, not experience or qualifications, and we hire people who have the potential to deliver an outstanding customer experience, regardless of background or ability. This gives us a diverse and vibrant workforce and means we employ people with a wide range of physical and mental disabilities who may not otherwise be able to find work. Once people join us, we're committed to providing the skills and training they need to unlock their long-term potential.

"The diversity of our workforce is a key strength, as well as being a great recruitment tool, and it is therefore important that we can accommodate employees that have much to

offer McDonald's. To do this, we work with Remploy at a local level to ensure people from all backgrounds are aware of the high-quality job and career opportunities at McDonald's."

Nigel Lewis,
CEO, AbilityNet

"The word disability is a problem. It conjures up images of severe disability, but not all 'disabled' people show obvious outward signs. Their disability could be visual, aural or cognitive for example, but with support they can comfortably be engaged. The beauty of IT is that it can be adapted to meet a user's needs, not matching the user to the IT.

"Disability unfortunately comes with a stigma. There are plenty of people who could be helped but who do not consider themselves disabled. The Disability





Discrimination Act prompted a vague awareness of a business's legal obligations to make reasonable adjustments, but lots of companies and employers are still not recognising the benefits of employing disabled people and they're not grasping what is possible in terms of accommodating disability, both on an internal and external level. Adapting technology opens so many doors for business growth and it needn't cost the earth.

"The spending power of the disabled as consumers is still being neglected, so to remedy this, one way is to look at the internet – the web is such an obvious tool to make accessible. Can someone with a visual impairment make an online booking, for example?"

"Websites can be audited and tested for their accessibility and usability by specialist teams. AbilityNet is a charity helping disabled adults and children use computers and the internet by adapting and adjusting their technology, be it by coding a website for the visually impaired so content can be read using a screen reader, by adapting a computer so it needn't be operated using a mouse, formatting 'sticky keys' to minimise the impact of hand tremors, or by avoiding the use of flashing images or moving text, which can be troublesome for dyslexia sufferers, for example. A website need not lose its aesthetic appeal by implementing some or all of these user-friendly design and navigation features."

"There's lots of free software out there. What Vista can do for accessibility is amazing. We worked with Legal and General to redesign their whole website to make it more accessible and useable and their online sales have increased by approximately 90 per cent as a result. Their investment into the redesign and rebuild paid back in just five months."

David Finnegan,
Community Links Access
Officer, Merseytravel

David Finnegan is employed by Transport

Executive, Merseytravel. He is responsible for ensuring that Liverpool's transport infrastructure is fully accessible to disabled people. In addition, he serves on the DPTAC – the Disabled Persons Transport Advisory Committee – a statutory government



advisory body involved in national policy formulation.

A wheelchair user for 38 years as a result of spinal injury, David has been an enthusiastic IT user ever since he joined Merseytravel 12 years ago. Paralysed from the neck down, David has a lap-top equipped with voice recognition technology and a tracker ball, as well as a desk-top version for the office. "I couldn't do my job without them," he says of his computers, "they are an essential part of my life, both at work and at home."

AbilityNet has supplied David with both IT support and the adapted systems he needs. "Life doesn't need to end after paralysis," says David. "Computer technology has allowed me to deliver in the same way as my colleagues and compete in the employment market as an equal. A fulfilling career gives me an identity and quality of life. And, at the end of the day, having a job means that I can pay the mortgage too – just like everyone else!" he adds. ■