

The growing disability talent pool has much to offer the hospitality sector, so why is it still such a well-kept secret? Michael McGrath, specialist hospitality disability adviser, inspirational speaker and the only disabled person in the world to have reached both the North and South Poles, tells *Emily Manson* how the industry can be more proactive in tapping this pool of talent

Willing and able

How committed is the UK hospitality industry to providing employment for disabled people?

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

We know it is important to have employees with diverse talents and backgrounds in order to benefit from the full wealth of skills, abilities and ideas available.

But even though the industry has acknowledged for a long time that there is a skills shortage, we still don't profit from this under-utilised pool of talent. One in six people in Europe is disabled; we should take advantage of this and be trailblazers in this area.

What is holding businesses back?

Organisations recognise that diversity and inclusion are business imperatives. Despite

this, many create diversity action plans that actually have little impact on the real issues.

Some studies of the hospitality industry show that, in terms of people development programmes, the main barriers seem to be a lack of financial support, existing work pressures and limited training budgets.

For instance, a study by Oxford Brookes showed several barriers to development, including ignorance of the benefits of training, emphasis on short-term survival issues and the perception that training is expensive.

What is being done to improve the situation?

One leading expert in the provision of specialist



Michael McGrath: "Operators must challenge negative assumptions"



employment services for disabled people, Remploy, placed more than 6,600 people into sustainable employment in 2007. As part of its drive to increase disabled people's chances of finding work in the hospitality and other industries, it has created a network of more than 20 city centre branches. These centres also provide vocational skills development programmes that offer advice and practical training on work-related topics ranging from communication skills and confidence-building to specific job-focused training.

But despite this resource, when compared with other business sectors, our industry is still losing out. Although about 1,000 disabled people were employed in 2007, this was mainly piecemeal, with no formal centralised strategy. It is even more of a shame because these employees have a proven track record of success,

sustainability, higher attendance levels and a strong work ethic.

There is now considerable evidence 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 industries, not least their loyalty. One example of best practice is fast-food operator McDonald's Restaurants, which uses Remploy as an integral part of its overall programme of "change and improvement".

What else can be done?

Organisations need to ensure that high-level diversity strategies explicitly aim to realise the potential for disabled people to contribute to business performance.

To succeed, operators must challenge negative assumptions over the capacities of workers with disabilities. They must possess a real boardroom desire to want to "disability-innovate".

The industry needs more champions and role models to be held up as examples of best practice, and more support – not just in recruiting disabled workers, but in providing tailored development programmes to those disabled people in work.

Are there any leading lights?

There are too few industry examples of businesses creating real tangible value by leveraging difference. Having said that, Remploy has worked with many operators, including independent brewing and pub retailing business Marstons, various Whitbread-owned restaurant chains including Beefeater and Pizza Hut, as well as Malmaison, Marriott Hotels, InterContinental Hotels and Hilton Hotels UK & Ireland.

Organisations that are confident in this area have accountability and shared commitment, robust policy

THE FACTS

- As the EU population gets older, the incidence of disability will increase and become a significant economic part of the population
- Statistics show you are either going to die young or acquire a disability in later life
- In 2010 (just one year away), about 40% of the UK population will be over 45 years old, the age at which the incidence of disability increases exponentially
- 2% of the UK's working-age population becomes disabled every year
- 78% of disabled people acquire their impairment aged 16 or older
- A UK graduate with a work-limiting disability is more likely to want to 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. But it is far behind the 74% of working-aged adults in jobs in the UK. The Government wants to improve this
- 10% of Europe's 457 million population is disabled – that's nine times Denmark's population and five times Belgium's

foundations, a focus on inclusive behaviours and cultures and an open, collaborative style that engages with disabled guests. But behind all of these elements is a strong commercial plan that realises the benefits of providing accessible services and products.

Employing talented disabled people is not a new idea, so why is it still such a battle?

The industry has yet to make that big leap and fully embrace a more diverse approach. Perhaps most telling is the fact that company surveys consistently conclude that UK organisations, having successfully employed disabled people, are keen to employ more. So perhaps the secret is at least getting out.

● Michael McGrath is a specialist hospitality adviser on revenue generation from the disability market sector; motivation, strategy and leadership speaker; performance improvement catalyst, disability commentator and role model; diversity champion and muscular dystrophy ambassador.

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The new site for hospitality

A new online community site has been launched to bring together all corners of the hospitality industry.

Table Talk is a new and exciting way to interact and network with other members and keep up-to-date with the latest goings on from around the industry.

Each member will be able to:

- Create a personal profile
- Set up individual galleries of photos and videos
- Take part in forums and blogs
- Add friends

So, whether you want to share your views, look for ideas and inspiration, or want to share photos and videos, Table Talk is the place to be.

Bring it to the table:

www.caterersearch.com/tabletalk

FORUMS & BLOGS

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PHOTOS

COMPETITIONS

FAVOURITE DISHES

ADVICE

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NETWORKING

EVENTS

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INSPIRATION

VIDEOS

RECOMMENDATIONS

The caterer group