



Housekeeping

by Michael P. Hensel

Does your hotel have housekeeping turnover issues? Refugees to the rescue.

*Another great article from The Rooms Chronicle®: the #1 journal for hotel rooms management! ***Important notice: This article may not be reproduced without permission of the publisher or the author.*** College of Hospitality and Tourism Management, Niagara University, P.O. Box 2036, Niagara University, NY 14109-2036. Phone: 866-Read TRC. E-mail: editor@roomschronicle.com*

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Employee turnover is one of the most costly obstacles that housekeeping managers can overcome, if they proceed proactively. As the economy is slowing down, many business travelers are cutting back on the number of nights they stay at hotels. In response, many hotels are lowering room rates to attract a depleted market. As room rates and profit margins become trimmed, cutting costs is now a priority, as many hotels are struggling to succeed. Often times, the high cost of employee turnover in the lodging industry is just accepted as the norm as it struggles to retain housekeeping employees that are frequently paid at minimum wage, or just slightly above it.

Even with the unemployment rate increasing, finding qualified and energetic associates is more challenging than ever. Every hotel manager should be asking themselves if their hotel is failing to find and retain the right associates with the temperament to do their respective jobs. Is the hotel settling for just anybody...perhaps a warm body? Is there an evident trend of associates that do not make it past their 90-day trial period? How much money did the hotel spend last year on employee turnover?

Many hotel managers have seen employee turnover percentages exceed well over 100%, even as high as 300%. This ends up costing thousands of dollars. Adding to this problem is how well some coached applicants can be in the art of the interview; they respond to the interviewer with exactly those qualities, characteristics and answers that the hotel might be looking for in a prospective applicant, but often the hotel will realize weeks later that they have hired an individual that does not match what was exhibited during the interview process.

The refugee solution

So where does a hotelier go when the job market is just not producing the associates that the hotel is looking for? What hidden treasure of untapped applicants could there be out there? Certainly, every hotel manager at some point can relate to these questions. Undoubtedly, hotels are looking for motivated, energetic, reliable, and efficient employees. But how do they find such a workforce that is willing to work for minimum wage? One answer that should be considered is to recognize the influx of refugees that are coming into the country.

Refugees come from areas that have been war stricken or they have been victims of ethnic cleansing. They typically have had to live in camps where they worked on farms just to produce the food they eat. Tens of thousands of refugees legally enter and resettle in the United States annually. Many local churches and refugee resettlement agencies are part of the process to acclimate the refugees to their new lives in the United States.

Pictured below: Four refugees from Burma who are now housekeeping and laundry attendants at the Courtyard by Marriott in Syracuse, NY.



By the numbers...

Key Statistics about the U.S. Lodging Industry for Year 2007

48,062	Properties*
4,476,191	Guestrooms
\$139.4	Billion in Sales
\$103.84	Average Daily Rate
\$65.52	Industry average RevPAR
63.1%	Average Occupancy Rate

*Based on properties with 15 or more rooms.

Source: Above figures are from AH&LA's 2008 Lodging Industry Profile, based on 2007 numbers.

Now, there could be hundreds of refugees in any hotel's geographic area. But how does the forward-thinking hotel manager get them to apply or even communicate to them about working for his hotel? Typically, all volunteer church organizations and refugee resettlement agencies have translators and case workers that prospective employers can contact about job openings. These individuals will assist refugees with filling out applications and even accompany a refugee to an interview to help translate and put the applicant more at ease.

Aside from obtaining housing, perhaps the most important step in the resettlement process for any refugee is obtaining gainful employment. Finding and holding a job will enable the refugees to sustain themselves, give them a sense of self worth and hope for the future, and allow them to become better integrated into society.

Some unique challenges

But be prepared! Once you have made a decision to hire one or more refugees there are some things that you need to prepare for. First of

all, it will take longer to train an associate that you cannot verbally communicate with. They are not acclimated to American culture or such unique concepts (to them at least) as the hotel industry, quality standards, or guest services.

Second, resettlement services will often provide a volunteer to come into the workplace and help translate for you, but usually their time is limited and you may only have an hour or two to directly communicate with the new associate. So use any time with a translator as wisely as possible by summing up as much new information as possible. What seems to work best is to have the translator there for the processing of new hire paperwork and new employee orientation. Before the translator leaves, have them convey to the new hires that for the next couple of days the associates will be shadowing and assisting another associate in their department.

Choose wisely who you will have train the refugee; patience is a must. Over the next week or so keep an ongoing list of training issues that you would like to communicate with the associate. Once you have organized a list, ask the translator if they can come back on property to go over some training with the new associate. Keep in mind that their time will most likely be limited, so use it wisely.

It is important to keep in close contact with the case worker for they will be capable of communicating with the refugee. Most refugees will meet with the case worker on a bi-weekly or monthly basis. The case worker will be able to communicate any potential problems, concerns, or dissatisfaction that the refugee may have regarding their new employment. Usually, refugees will not communicate these issues directly with Management, sometimes because of language barriers, but more than likely due to fear of retribution or retaliation. Remember that these individuals became refugees and fled their homeland because they were persecuted for their race, gender, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group. Because of conditions in their home country and their fear of persecution, they are unwilling or unable to return and often hold an inherent fear of any authority figure. This fear will diminish over time as the refugee becomes settled in their new country, new home and new job.

Some of the unique challenges the new associates from our hotel have overcome include: Learning how to take public transportation, the concept of paying bills, cashing paychecks, proper hygiene, the concept of a "do-not-disturb" sign, how to swipe their employee identification card, and how to communicate with guests.

One of our new associates, who had been working for us for over a month, brought in an eviction notice! Puzzled by this we found out that the associate had no idea that they were responsible for paying their own bills. In fact, the paychecks they were receiving from the hotel were in a pile on their kitchen table. Another great tool that we developed was a laminated card that the associates can hand to the guest stating:

"Hello, I am a refugee who has just recently moved to this country and I'm extremely grateful for this opportunity. My understanding of the English language is very limited. If you need any assistance or would like to make a request please dial 0 to contact the front desk and this will be communicated to me. Thank you and have a nice day."



Many of our refugees are taking English classes offered at churches and improving their communication skills daily.

The benefits

Now this might seem like a considerable commitment on the part of the hotel, but consider what it gains in return: Associates who are reliable, efficient, energetic, committed, eager to learn, willing to take on additional duties, and motivated to succeed.

Since we started employing refugees, our associate “call off” volume has dropped dramatically, the quality and volume of work has increased, they are succeeding past their 90-day trial periods, and our employee turnover is decreasing. Most importantly is the humanistic side. You are giving someone the chance to have a better life, to succeed in making their dreams come true.

One cannot measure the gratitude we receive from our refugee employees. Our country may have rescued them but they have come to the rescue of our hotel. ✧

(Michael P. Hensel is the operations manager of the Courtyard by Marriott in Syracuse, NY, where he oversees housekeeping and on-premise laundry. In the past several months, the hotel has hired several refugees from Burma to reduce turnover in its housekeeping department. E-mail: michael.hensel@marriott.com.)