

Good Housekeeping with Marriott Hotel in Hong Kong SAR

In an era when more economies are moving into services and tourism is fast emerging as a prime income-earning industry, turning down sheets is turning into jobs for people with disabilities. A first-of-its-kind partnership project in Hong Kong brings together a nonprofit organization and one of the city's major hotels to teach people with intellectual disabilities how to clean upscale lodgings.

The teaming of J.W. Marriott Hotel and the Hong Chi Association has produced an increasingly popular training course that offers potential benefit to other hotel chains and disability organizations in Hong Kong SAR.

For Hong Chi, the partnership provided a much-needed impetus. In 2001, the open-market hiring rate of Hong Chi's vocational training graduates with intellectual disabilities was down by 40 to 50 per cent. After starting as a sheltered workshop in 1976 and adjusting its programmes over the years to help its clients attain independence, Hong Chi paid close attention to trends in the economy. It initiated on-the-job training in sewing, metal and woodwork specialties. By the early 1990s, it achieved an open-market hiring rate of 60 to 80 per cent. But then the jobs requiring those skills moved out of Hong Kong to lower-wage areas. So Hong Chi began shifting to high-demand service skills, such as baking, fast-food catering, professional cleaning and clerking in office and convenience stores.

During the visit of an ILO specialist, conversations with Hong Chi touched on how the Marriott Hotel chain had hired disabled employees in many locations in the United States. With a nothing-to-lose spirit, Hong Chi sent a letter of proposal to the local hotel's general manager asking him to consider a partnership programme in training people to clean rooms; the programme would include on-the-job apprenticeships for possible employment with Marriott.

The response was positive and the partnership began. After visiting Hong Chi's leafy nine-hectare residential and training compound and vocational services facility in 2001, the Marriott general manager offered to build – at the centre – two model rooms replicating Marriott rooms for use in training.

From then on, progress was slow but steady. Hotel officials and housekeeping supervisors visited the Hong Chi training centre to understand the abilities of trainees with intellectual disabilities. Then, four Hong Chi staff members – one teacher, one instructor and two social workers – attended a three-week intensive training programme with the hotel staff to learn how Marriott makes its beds, folds its towels and cleans its rooms. After the training session, the four staff members wrote up a training programme and sent it to the hotel for comment.

During the three months in 2002 needed to build the model rooms, the Hong Chi staff selected seven trainees who demonstrated basic academic knowledge, acceptable communication and language skills, familiarity with number concepts, a measure of politeness and good grooming. Priority went to trainees with experience in cleaning work and an interest in hotel service.

The training period at the Hong Chi centre lasted three months: five days per week, seven hours per day. It included the teaching of English phrases and how to fill out basic forms required of room service workers, such as mini-bar consumption records. The trainees lived at Hong Chi's hostel accommodations during the weekdays and went home on weekends. When the trainees moved to on-the-job training at the hotel, they returned to their homes.

The seven trainees interviewed with Marriott staff members for placement in on-the-job training. Three were accepted. But when they began their apprenticeship in June 2002, problems suddenly sprang up. The trainees' work was slower than in the "classroom". Part of problem was the training itself. While the instructors understood how to teach people with specific disabilities, they were not as adept in tidying a room in the requisite time period demanded by Marriott's work schedule. Immediately, two Hong Chi instructors attended a two-month refresher programme at the hotel. Marriott's director of services believed that if the trainers did not have sufficient finesse to finish ten rooms in a day, they could not adequately prepare the trainees to the hotel's standard. In another major adjustment to the programme the Hong Chi trainers found they needed to assist the trainees in the hotel until they were familiar with the new environment. In September 2002, the training programme continued without any more setbacks.

"In the beginning I thought our trainees would only be able to do specific tasks each and would have to work together in groups to service one room. As it has turned out, they can work independently and finish all the tasks on their own," notes Ms. Nora Wong, the recently retired director of the Hong Chi vocational training centre.

The trainees work five days a week, receive breakfast and lunch every working day and are paid HK\$35 (US\$4.50) for each room serviced. Hong Chi assumes responsibility for the trainees' accident insurance. Once training is complete, they are expected to be hired as permanent employees.

Marriott recently increased the apprenticeship positions to five. "We can see they're very stable employees," says Sandra Ng, Marriott Hong Kong's human resource director. "They really put their heart into the job."

For More Information

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