

HOTEL REGENBOGENHAUS, FREIBERG, GERMANY

Employment and Training of Employees with Disabilities

Introduction

The Regenbogenhaus hotel is not an ordinary hotel. Since 2001 the hotel has been based on the principle of "lived integration". The small hotel has not just specialised in barrier-free tourism, but also sets an example itself by offering young people with disabilities the chance to gain a professional qualification. Of course, the hotel also appeals to non-disabled guests and has a mixed clientele, from business travellers through to holidaymakers who want to enjoy barrier-free holidays.

The Regenbogenhaus is still a relatively young hotel. In 1997, the Regenbogenhaus e.V. Freiberg was founded and is a member of the Paritätische Sachsen. The aim of the association was to provide qualification to people with intellectual and physical disabilities for employment in the hotel and catering industry and to create a suitable work environment for them. The Stadthaushotel in Hamburg inspired the Regenbogenhaus. The Regenbogenhaus was converted to a hotel; and a small business firm (gGmbH) was established to manage the hotel. The hotel opened its doors for business on 1st September 2001.

The principles of accessibility are evident in all areas of the hotel, thus, the hotel is not just fully wheelchair-accessible but also offers rooms for allergy sufferers and has a special service for blind, deaf and hard of hearing people. Altogether, the hotel has a total 32 beds; 3 seminar rooms with a capacity of up to 50 people and a reasonably priced restaurant. While the restaurant does not offer à la carte food, dietary requirements can be satisfied through pre-reservations.

Moreover, not only is the accommodation disability-friendly, but many additional services for a barrier-free vacation are offered, from a care service through to a mobility service. The hotel works closely with local physicians and nursing staff managers and services such as holiday dialysis or special care services can be provided.

In total, 14 staff members together with 5 skilled professionals and a voluntary managing director worked at the Regenbogenhaus in summer 2008 who had disabilities.

Organisational Training Strategy

As Regenbogenhaus specialises in the employment and training of people with intellectual and physical disabilities. This strategy strongly influences the HR processes of the hotel.

The Regenbogenhaus trains young people on a regular basis. The vocational training, however, is not delivered by means of dual training, which alternately takes place at the company training centre and at a vocational school, as is usual practice in Germany.

Instead, training is delivered by means of qualification modules. The possibility of gaining an accredited qualification is offered in conjunction with the Chamber of Industry and Commerce in Chemnitz; staff members have the chance to qualify as "catering assistants" by taking an external examination. During this process, skilled professionals at the Regenbogenhaus train and teach apprentices in order to prepare them for the examination. During the summer of 2008, six persons were being trained at the Regenbogenhaus.

Regenbogenhaus was founded as a training centre in which people with intellectual and physical disabilities would gain qualifications and find suitable employment. Twenty apprentices who enrolled in the initial pilot project, 14 are still employed at the Regenbogenhaus. During the course of the project, apprentices have the opportunity to work in all hotel departments. Moreover, profiles of apprentices were conducted to establish their key strengths and the level of stress they are able to withstand. Depending on their ability to withstand stress, apprentices work between around 4½ to 8 hours per day.

Requirements of Skilled Professionals

All skilled staff receive full training upon commencing work at the hotel. Furthermore, they must show a willingness to work within special requirements of the Regenbogenhaus. A great deal of flexibility is required from skilled staff. They need to demonstrate empathy skills and ascertain the suitability of staff for certain tasks. A grading system is in place identifying the authorisation and abilities of staff and apprentices to carry out certain tasks. However, no staff or apprentices are permitted to perform the role of cashier.

Labour Law-related General Conditions

All staff members at the Regenbogenhaus undergo an initial trial period to establish their suitability for working at the hotel. This trial period is also important in dealing with staff with disabilities as these staff can only be laid off with the consent of the Integration Office at the end of the trial period. Moreover, staff with disabilities are entitled to 5 days additional vacation.

In all activities, the Regenbogenhaus combines work with a fun environment. This has led to staff members forming a close working team with strong bonds amongst team members. Consequently, an atmosphere of mutual give-and-take exists among staff at the hotel.

Organisational Challenges

Working with people with intellectual and physical disabilities persons requires a great amount of skill, instinct and patience. Many companies do not have the time or expertise to work with people with disabilities. Many also think that it costs more. Moreover, several challenges arise from working with people with disabilities. The hotel has found that one of the aspects they have found to be challenging is the need to repeat, re-enforce re-train the staff as they found that many staff with specific disabilities tend to forget things easily. Therefore, refresher courses are sometimes required to refocus the efforts of some staff. Some of the disabilities in question require, from a learning perspective, that tasks are repetitious, allowing staff to form habits and develop their skills. It is important to remember that this is distinct from being in a job that is

monotonous. Additionally, when employing staff with disabilities they are not laid off during the winter/off-peak months, as would be common practice among firms in the hotel and catering sector.

Impact and Benefits

The Regenbogenhaus hotel fills a market niche and is therefore exceptional in Saxony where there are no other hotels which are completely barrier-free. The success of the hotel is apparent from hotel reviews, where the hotel is always very favourably rated with guests complementing the high quality of its services. Moreover, the hotel has a unique atmosphere characterised by helpful staff members and consideration amongst customers and staff.

In 2007, the hotel received 1st place at the “Deichmann Förderpreis” against youth unemployment and was awarded 20,000 euro. Aside from the award, the Regenbogenhaus is a commercial hotel which has to be self-sufficient. It receives some support money from the Integration Office from the compensatory levy which companies who do not employ people with disabilities are required to pay under German law.

Future Developments

Since January 2008, people with disabilities in Germany have the opportunity to apply for support from the Federal Employment to “purchase” benefits. These benefits can take the form of assisted living, transport services or employment at a sheltered workshop for those with disabilities. Instead of employment at a sheltered workshop, training at the Regenbogenhaus can also be funded. In this case, the Regenbogenhaus operates as a care provider in the vocational training domain instead of a sheltered workshop for people with disabilities. In doing so, a vocational training agreement is made with the beneficiary of the budget. In return, Regenbogenhaus is refunded the costs for the training. Regenbogenhaus has plans for the future to continue to capitalise on this type of apprenticeship in which the costs are refunded.

Conclusion

This story represents a unique business case. It is evident that the staff have high potential for promotion and that the company is committed to both social and business needs. The case study demonstrates how integration of people with specific needs can lead to effective results, especially if care and attention is paid to the skillsets of staff – irrespective of their needs. In particular, an industry that is commonly associated with poor treatment of staff with low pay and unsocial hours is presented as a unique business with exemplar practices not just in providing a learning and developmental opportunity for its staff but through creating and fostering a positive work environment from a typically marginalised group.