

## **SHERATON FOTA ISLAND, CORK, IRELAND**

**“Recruit on the basis of attitude rather than skill”**

### **Introduction**

Located on Fota Island in County Cork, the Sheraton Hotel and Spa is one of Ireland's 5-star properties. The hotel comprises 131 bedrooms of which 6 are suites: the hotel spa has 18 treatments rooms, a thermal suite and a hydrotherapy suite and the hotel also hosts 6 conference rooms – the largest of which can accommodate 240 people for dinner. There are three food and beverage options: The Cove restaurant provides a fine-dining gourmet experience to guests making use of local organic produce and fresh seafood; The Fota restaurant serves breakfasts and a comfortable relaxed setting for evening meals; while the Amber lounge offers guests a range of light snacks and sandwiches. The hotel is located 15 minutes drive from Cork City Centre on an island in Cork harbour. Fota Island is home to Ireland's only wildlife park and three championship golf courses on a 780 acre woodland estate.

The origins of Sheraton dates back to 1937 when the company founders, Ernest Henderson and Robert Moore opened their first hotel in Springfield, Massachusetts. Sheraton expanded internationally in 1949 through the purchase of two Canadian hotels and in the 1960s acquired hotels in Latin America and the Middle East. In 1998, Sheraton hotels were purchase by the Starwood Hotels and Resorts group. The Sheraton Fota Island hotel and Spa opened its doors in May 2006 becoming the fastest ever opening of a Sheraton hotel – coming only 6 months after the conclusion of a deal with Starwood Hotels and Resorts to operate the hotel.

This case study will focus on the recruitment and selection methods employed at Sheraton Fota Island Hotel and Spa. It will examine the challenges faced in launching a large 5-star property and the methods used for selecting suitable candidates capable of delivering superior service quality.

### **Methods for Sourcing Staff**

Finding suitable staff to work at the Sheraton Fota Island Hotel and Spa was a considerable challenge to HR staff given the short lead time prior to the hotel launch. Such difficulties were exacerbated by two factors: firstly, the lack of public transport to the property made it difficult to attract candidates without independent means of transport and secondly, the success of the Celtic Tiger economy resulted in vigorous competition for hospitality staff and a shortage of highly skilled staff. HR manager, Orla

Farrell expresses the difficulties experienced in the following terms:

*“In terms of getting anyone to work in the hotel industry, every hotel in the country was expanding; new hotels were opening at an accelerated rate and there was a serious skills shortage at the time. In relation to our requirements, we were obviously looking for someone*

*with 5 star skills which just wasn't available in the local market. So to overcome this limitation, we really took the approach which is our company approach, and has been so for a while, which is to recruit on the basis of attitude rather than skill".*

By focusing on attitude, rather than skills, HR staff needed to adjust their recruitment and selection methods to get an accurate profile of the personality and outlook of job applicants. By focusing on attitude, HR staff realised the need to provide substantial training to staff to bring them up to 5-star standard. They also made a strategic decision to not fill vacancies where suitable candidates were not available. For this reason, it took HR staff four months to fill the position of executive housekeeper.

Behavioural interviewing is a key approach adopted by the hotel to identify candidates who will fit well with the ethos of the hotel. Through getting job candidates to describe real experiences and reactions to certain situations, the HR staff are able to more accurately access the values and outlook of individuals. Recruiter Chris Hough describes the advantages of using a behavioural interviewing technique in the following terms:

*"I'm looking for personality; I interact with them in an interview in a way that is not just standardised questions. I will get them to tell me a bit about themselves and let them talk for a while, see if they have a little bit of flair a bit of personality. So, for example, if I review 2 CV's, I could easily go for a 16 year old rather than the 22 year old with prior experience on the basis of the interview experience".*

Job applicants were also required to undergo a series of mini-assessments to determine their suitability for jobs advertised. Typically, the session commences with a short presentation on the company accompanied by tea/coffee and a short question and answer session. Job candidates were then placed into small groups and asked to introduce themselves and explain sample menus to other individuals in the group whilst being observed by group facilitators. This examines the communication skills and confidence of job applicants and is often followed by verbal, numerical and abstract reasoning tests.

To optimise the labour market pool, Sheraton Fota Island Hotel and Spa welcomes applicants from a wide variety of diverse backgrounds. The hotel has also forged partnerships with Shannon Hotel School from which it receives students onto its graduate management training programme. It also hosts 2nd and 3rd year students on work placements to allow them to sample work in a 5-star hotel. The hotel welcomes staff from other Starwood hotels and employs a diverse workforce – in terms of nationality, gender and age. HR manager, Orla Farrell describes the example of Sean who moved to Sheraton for a career change:

*"Sean who is one of our concierge team, and who is probably on of the people in the hotel who gets the most positive comments, retired from a completely different industry.. I think pharmaceutical., and he came here with no skills in working in this type of establishment but he is someone who would have the local knowledge but certainly has no skills in relation to working in a hotel but we trained him on*

*that and now as I said he is one of the people who gets very positive comments”.*

### **Employee Training & Succession Planning**

Once the selection process is complete, new employees are given a full day's induction carried out by the HR department. This is followed by a half-day departmental induction and formulation of an individual training plan. After their first month, employees are invited to a follow-up induction day and can also elect to receive off-the-job training if required. At a departmental level, employee skills are assessed in relation to the individual departmental training record and where necessary additional training is arranged.

Talent management is a key priority at Sheraton and Starwood hotels. It is viewed as a priority both in relation to staff retention and succession planning. The talent management system is labelled “Talent Review” and serves to alert management to employees who have potential to move up the hierarchy of the organisation. All employees have access to an individual profile where they are invited to maintain a continuing professional development record. Employees can upload their CV, outline attendance at training programmes and outline their career and personal development ambitions. HR manager, Orla Farrell describes the goals of the “Talent Review” system from an organisational perspective:

*“As part of their appraisal, we would formally discuss with the employee, what were their plans and then the manager and employee would review what the next position should be. For a HR point of view, we would mark the individual according to their future potential: (a) high potential is 2 positions in next 5 years; (b) average potential is 1 position in next 5 years; (c) ready for a lateral or development move which is moving from restaurant manager in one hotel to another or moving from restaurant manager to bar manager or something similar, (d) continue in their current role which may be because the person doesn't want to or isn't ready to move (e) uncertain which tends to be used if we have concerns around performance”.*

### **Conclusion**

This case study considered the recruitment and selection practices adopted by the Sheraton Fota Island Hotel and Spa. It examined the difficulties faced by the HR staff at the hotel in sourcing suitable employees for a leading 5-star establishment. It has looked at the importance attached by the hotel to behavioural interviewing and the priority placed on attitude over employee skills. It described some of the assessments carried out by job applicants and the induction process which employees engage in. The induction process and training provided to employees is outlined and the Sheraton “Talent Review” system is reviewed.

