

ADVERTISING SUPPLEMENT

World of opportunity in Boston hotels Industry is hospitable to guests and employees alike

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"It's the United Nations here," brags Joe Moreira, executive steward at Boston's Four Seasons Hotel. Moreira, 60, a native of the Cape Verde Islands, uses Portuguese, English, some Spanish, a little French, and even a smattering of Ethiopian as he rallies his backstage team to create the perfect welcome for breakfasts, banquets, and birthday parties.

Multiculturalism is the rule rather than the exception in Boston's thriving hospitality industry. The industry is well known as a meritocracy that employs and rewards people from all backgrounds and walks of life, says Reed Woodworth, head of the Boston office of PKF Hospitality Research, an Atlanta-based firm that monitors the business nationwide.

The industry staged a spectacular comeback after the slump in travel following the attacks of September 11, 2001. "The Boston metropolitan area has done exceptionally well over the last few years," says Woodworth, and the latest data from PKF suggest that the local hotel business will continue to grow, although at a slower rate than in the recent past. Top-flight hotels put significant resources into recruiting, retaining, and cultivating their multiethnic workers. People like Reynolds Burns, 27, whose family was evacuated from New Orleans to Camp Edwards, at the Otis Air Force Base on Cape Cod after Hurricane Katrina in 2005. Encouraged by a social worker at the camp to apply to The Four Seasons, Burns was hired as a security guard. As an African American from an ethnically mixed area of New Orleans, he immediately felt at home among the hotel's diverse workforce.

"They accepted me right away," says Burns, speaking by telephone from his office at the new Four Seasons in St. Louis, Mo., where he recently moved to take the post of Security Manager. From the first day of orientation, he says, he got the message, "you can be successful in this company," and so it proved. Within 12 months, he was promoted to supervisor, then chosen for the Supervisory Development Program that grooms future managers. Now, he says, he's excited to be part of a team building a new operation from the ground up in St. Louis.

Four Seasons Hotels and Marriott International are among 14 employers nationwide to have featured in Fortune Magazine's annual list of "100 Best Companies to Work For in the US" every year since the list was launched in 1998. The Four Seasons ranked second on the 2008 scorecard for workforce diversity, with an estimated 66 per cent of the group's 12,851 employees belonging to ethnic minorities. Marriott International ranked fourth, with around 61 per cent of its 123,203 workforce coming from minorities.

"We're open to all nationalities, and we hire based on attitude," says Catriona Eldemery, director of human resources at The Four Seasons Boston. "We're looking for energy, enthusiasm, aptitude, rather than a background in the industry," says Eldemery. This year, as for the past two years, the hotel will offer a free on-site ESL program to 10 employees seeking to improve their English, and Eldemery is researching interactive online language teaching programs to make the opportunity more widely available.

Debbie McIlroy is general manager of the Marriott Residence Inn in Cambridge and a member of the chain's regional diversity council for the East. She has been impressed by the effectiveness of the Sed de Saber(tm) (Thirst for Knowledge) Spanish/English Language system, an interactive electronic learning system that uses storytelling and games to improve workplace-specific English skills, introduced throughout the company in 2006. Currently, two of her 65 associates are following the four-month program, and nine other employees are enrolled in traditional on-site ESL classes. "It's very rewarding to see the outcome in terms of their increased confidence," she says.

In the pyramidal structure of the hotel industry, with its armies of hourly paid housekeepers, janitors, waiters, bartenders, and doormen, the rewards for scaling the management hierarchy are clear. Within Four Seasons Hotels in the U.S., according to Fortune, the group's most common salaried position is Assistant Food and Beverage Manager, netting annual pay of \$48,508, while the most numerous hourly paid workers are Guest Room Attendants, formerly known as chamber maids, who earn just over \$26,000. Comparable positions in Marriott International are Sales Managers, with annual pay of \$56,382, and Housekeepers earning \$22,863. Both companies show an annual turnover rate-percentage of employees who leave voluntarily in the course of one year- of 18 per cent, a figure that Fortune notes is "among the lowest in the field."

Both Marriott International and The Four Seasons promote from within. More than 3,000 Marriott hotel managers started in hourly positions, according to spokeswoman Dasha Ross. "Training is a big focus point," says McIlroy, and quarterly Management Candidacy Review Boards ensure ongoing talent-spotting throughout the company.

At The Four Seasons Boston, Singapore-born Learning Manager Asima Jones regularly runs 12-week Supervisory Development Programs for groups of 10 employees who have shown management potential. The hotel's open-door hiring policy is important for attracting applicants in the first place, says Jones. Every week, there are two-hour slots on Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays when prospective employees can walk in, fill in an application, and possibly have an interview the same day. Because the hotel puts a premium on personality and attitude, says Eldemery, a successful applicant can expect to interview with at least five different staff members. "We want people to understand the different cultural backgrounds," says Jones.

With an Indian father and a half Pakistani, half Chinese mother, and a background in international banking, she is well qualified to run annual "Understanding Diversity" sessions for every department in the hotel, along with Eldemery, her boss, who is Irish. "People have a lot of questions," says Jones, about everything from food to different ideas about personal space. In a multicultural setting, she says, one person's idea of a friendly gesture can be seen as a violation of privacy by someone from a different background.

One universal sign of welcome that could never be misinterpreted is the brilliant smile of door attendant Louie Douyon, 44, who came to the U.S. from Haiti more than 20 years ago. Outside the main entrance of The Four Seasons Boston on a chilly February day, Douyon greets and speeds guests on their way, as he has done for the past 14 years. "This is the best view in town," he says, looking over the road at the Public Gardens. "This is my stage," Douyon tells a departing visitor. "I see everybody." And whether you're a movie star or a hopeful job-hunter, he'll welcome you with the same great smile. ■