

Can And Able

Two years ago, the hospitality sector in India opened itself up to the differently-abled. Fast food chains such as Barista, Costa Coffee and KFC started employing the hearing, speech and visually impaired as waiters. Barista placed them at customer interface positions rather than limiting them to back-end operations.

Now, five-star hotels are taking the story forward. Inside the fine-dining restaurant at Lemon Tree Premier in Gurgaon's Sector 29, Anurag Tripathi, a hearing and speech impaired youth in his late twenties, is busy taking orders as a "restaurant associate". He offers customers a tick-the-right option menu. No one minds this style of ordering sans conversation.

Even The ITC Group now employs 125 differently-abled in their properties all over India. Niranjana Khatri, General Manager, WelcomEviron, ITC's social arm, says, "The differently-abled can be employed in a way that their working faculties are utilised. For instance, a hearing impaired person can be employed as a doorman. A visually impaired person is a pianist at one of our restaurants. Several hearing disabled girls are working in our in-house beauty parlours."

Lemon Tree, which also has more than a hundred differently-abled employees, has posted a hearing disabled person in its housekeeping team in EDM Mall, Ghaziabad. Rajiv Kumar Singhal gets the team to change bedsheets and replace towels — pointing at the areas that need attention.

At both these hotel chains, employing the differently-abled is not a part of their Corporate Social Responsibility initiatives. Instead, they are a part of their sanctioned staff strength. "We have recruited the specially-abled in all our 17 properties," says R Hari, General Manager (Human Resources), Lemon Tree Hotels.

The remuneration of a differently-abled working person is commensurate with the job profile. "Roughly, they take home anything between Rs 10,000 to

Rs 25,000 a month. Some come from modest backgrounds, where a salary helps, others are just happy with the opportunity," says Khatri. He also points out that he finds the hearing impaired people efficient for desk jobs simply because no amount of noise can distract them. Even Hari admits that employing them has been profitable because their attrition rate is much lower compared to others.

Among the few organisations that partnered with these hotel chains to educate and train the differently-abled is Samarth Educational Trust, a Delhi NGO. It was trial by fire for Dr Jitendra Agarwal, the founder, a practising dentist till 2004. That's when he started to lose his central vision, rendering him unfit for his profession or any other. "Sensitised to the trauma of being disabled and unemployable, I started Samarth in 2009 and tied up with Costa Coffee and Pizza Hut, among others, to train and place the specially-abled. This year, the tie-ups expanded to five-star chains," says Agarwal. It is Khatri who has the last word. "Essentially, the job has to be repetitive, easy and safe," says he.

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