

# Employment of Persons with Disabilities in the Hotel Sector: A Case of Lemon Tree Hotels



**Hema Verma**

Assistant Professor,  
Faculty of Management,  
M.J.P. Rohilkhand University,  
Bareilly, U.P., India

## Abstract

A Niti Aayog sponsored report (2016) estimates PWD populations in India at about 70 million. A survey conducted by National Centre for Promotion of Employment for Disabled People (NCPEDP) in 1999 found that the public sector, private sector and Multinational Corporations employed 0.54 per cent, 0.28 per cent and a dismal 0.05 per cent people with disabilities respectively. One of the important requirements for integration of disabled people into the mainstream is employment. According to World Travel and Tourism Council (2012), in 2011 Travel & Tourism generated 24,975,000 jobs directly in India (5.0% of total employment) which is expected to rise to 30,198,000 jobs by 2022. The general perception about the hospitality industry is that it is profit driven and is only concerned about its own business. Many Hotel companies are involved in a wide variety of community development projects and programmes like health, education, livelihoods, women-child welfare and so on. Hotel companies are also working with community based disability organisations to help train people with disabilities for employment in the industry. Lemon Tree Hotels has been conferred with several national and international awards like NCPEDP Hellen Keler Award 2017 for Role Model Companies; Dr. Anji Reddy Memorial Award for Model Employer for Persons With Disabilities 2017; Gold Winner- 'Best Accommodation for Responsible Employment category' 2016, WTM®, London; Asian Human Capital Award 2015 for Innovative and Impactful People Practices by Ministry of Manpower, Singapore; Human Capital Leadership Institute, Cornell University Exemplary Practice Award 2014 for Lemon Tree Hotels' companywide inclusion program and initiative of hiring and supporting People with Disabilities; 'Outstanding Work in the Creation of Barrier-Free Environment for Persons with Disabilities', 2012 by the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, Government of India; the prestigious NCPEDP Shell Helen Keller award, 2010 for exemplary beliefs and practices in employing Differently Enabled People.

"Disability is an outcome of the interaction of impairment, activity limitations, and participation restriction in a specific environment. Accordingly, impairment does not necessarily yield disability, if the environment poses no restrictions" (Poria, Reichel, & Brandt, 2011, p.572). Employing persons with disabilities and the objective of profit need not be mutually exclusive; rather it can be a mutually beneficial partnership. This paper, on the basis of content of websites, annual reports and CSR reports, studies the best practice of employment of persons with disabilities in the Lemon Tree Group.

**Keywords:** Training, Employment, Persons with Disabilities (PWDs), Hospitality, Mutually Beneficial.

## Introduction

One billion people face some form of disability i.e. 15 % of the world population (WHO, 2011). In the past persons with disabilities (PWDs) were provided special facilities like separate schools but now policy emphasis has shifted to social and educational inclusion. Disability is more of a social condition rather than a medical one (Angela, 2015). With the adoption of *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (CRPD), by the United Nations in 2006, disability is now recognised as a human rights issue. CRPD says that disability is an evolving concept and emphasises that disability is not an absolute term and its impact depends on the attitudinal and environmental conditions which may hinder/ facilitate

participation in the community. Though the United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with disability (UNCRPD) was ratified by India in 2007 PWDs still have difficulties in the job market (ILO 2011). India has fulfilled the obligations of UNCRP with the enactment of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPWD) Act, 2016 replacing the Persons with Disabilities (Equal Opportunities, Protection of Rights and Full Participation) Act, 1995. This Act provides for 4% reservation for PWDs from the earlier 3% in government vacancies, and the number of disabilities recognised has been increased to twenty one from the earlier seven. The act also proposes free education for each child with disability up to the age of 18. Also, accessibility in public building has to be ensured within a time frame.

Employment means more than a job or income, it means being part of a group involved in some meaningful activity, being valued and wanted both in the eyes of self and others. Employment mostly is the factor which decides whether a person will become capable of independent living. Employment rates of PWDs are lower in all countries compared to the general population. PWDs whose disability affects their ability to work generally have lesser education, lower earnings and hence face more difficulties in the labour market compared to disabled persons whose work ability is not affected due to disability (Bomana, Kjellberg, Danermark & Bomana, 2015). The important thing for employability is the ability of any person to do something, not his/ her disability.

#### **Objectives of the Study**

This paper seeks to study the best practice of employment of persons with disabilities by the Lemon Tree Group and answer questions like: Why do companies employ PWDs? Is employing PWDs an act of CSR with cost implications for companies? What are the work areas where PWDs can be employed in Hotels? Are there any advantages of employing PWDs in the hotel sector?

#### **Literature Review**

The Travel & Tourism sector drives economic growth and employment creation - in 2018 it created one in ten jobs all over the world (WTTC, 2019).

As per a KPMG study (2015) the Tourism and Hospitality industry in India growing 7.2 % per annum and will by 2022 employ about 14 million people. Hotels will employ about 17 % and restaurants 78% of the total people employed in the sector. Hence, Tourism & Hospitality being a manpower intensive industry has the potential to be the single largest employment generator.

About 2.21 % of India's population comprises Persons with Disabilities which is 21.9 million people (Census, 2011). While the Planning Commission estimates the PWD population at 5% and the World Bank (2007) recognises that growing evidence pegs PWD population in India at about, 4-8% of total population which is 40-80 million people. A Niti Aayog sponsored report (2016) estimates PWD populations in India at about 70 million.

The challenges that PWDs face in getting employed have been identified as low literacy levels since most schools in India lack facilities to educate students with disabilities, lack of access to skills and technology to fit in the jobs available, lack of information on PWD talent and a general negative attitude towards them- companies consider employing PWDs as an act of social responsibility and not as one which has potential benefits, lack of awareness on jobs available and unintentional exclusions by companies where PWDs may possess the skills required through NGO's etc but do not have formal educational qualifications. Besides this there are several challenges faced by PWDs during the course of employment - lack of effective integration processes with colleagues due to prejudices, lack of career advancement opportunities often due to misperception by managers that they will not be able to fulfil more complex job responsibilities- many times work is done by others and PWDs are retained only to fulfil company policy which results in much harm to the PWD cause, redundancy in case the company does not skill and develop PWD employees, lack of effective redress mechanisms, lack of proper assignment of work, accessibility issues in buildings and lack of assistive technologies, negative attitudes toward employees with disabilities and issues in socialising arise due to ignorance, stereotyping, pity, fear etc. which should be dealt with by training and building an inclusive culture (NCPED & Oxfam, 2019).

"Disability is an outcome of the interaction of impairment, activity limitations, and participation restriction in a specific environment. Accordingly, impairment does not necessarily yield disability, if the environment poses no restrictions" (Poria, Reichel, & Brandt, 2011, p.572). PWDs need organisations to ponder upon changes, training and support that can help them fit into a job. Employees should be hired on the basis of merit, suitability and capability to perform the job disregarding disability or its degree (Bengisua, M & Baltab, S. 2010). PWDs in line with their professional knowledge and skills can fulfill any task in the hospitality industry (Bengisua, M & Baltab, S. 2010).

#### **Research Design/ Methodology**

The company website, annual reports, CSR reports and other secondary resources were studied.

#### **The Lemon Tree Group: An Overview**

Lemon Tree Hotels is India's third largest chain overall and is the largest in the mid-priced hotel segment (Horwath Report, 2017). Lemon Tree from its first hotel in 2004 now has presence in 34 Indian cities with 57 properties comprising close to 6,000 rooms and more than 5,000 employees. The group operates three brands- Lemon Tree Premier, Lemon Tree Hotels and Red Fox by Lemon Tree Hotels to meet needs across economy to upper midscale business and leisure segments.

#### **The concept of Triple Bottom Line and the Lemon Tree Group**

The Triple Bottom Line, also called "people, planet, profit", means measuring organizational success on the social, ecological and economic parameters. According to the Triple Bottom Line,

companies need to assume responsibilities at three tiers- responsibility towards environment, responsibility towards society and responsibility towards its financial bottom line. Companies while following strict systems on the financial front shun environmental and social obligations considering them a strain on their commercial interests. On the other hand, the Lemon Tree group is practicing this approach since inception and focuses on delivering a healthy 'triple bottom line' through varied sustainability efforts built into its operational practices- using renewable energy, water recycling, waste management and so on. The company strongly believes in providing opportunities to the 'opportunity deprived' people and is known for its inclusive culture with unusually large number of employees with disabilities and socially disadvantaged sections.

#### **PWD HR Practices of the Lemon Tree Group**

##### **How it started for Lemon Tree**

Having opened its first hotel in 2004 and with five properties two years later, Lemon Tree received its first investment worth \$ 75million from Warburg Pincus- this lead the owner Mr. Keswani to hire two PWDs simply as an act of gratitude. Later a meeting with one of these EWD's mother lead him to set a target of hiring 100 PWDs by 2011 for the group.

EWDs were initially trained for and assigned back end roles without the element of guest

##### **'Opportunity Deprived Indians' as identified by Lemon Tree (Source: Lemon Tree Website)**

Employees with Disability (EWD):

###### *Physical Disability*

Speech and Hearing Impaired (SHI)  
Orthopedically Handicapped (OH)  
Visually Impaired (VI), Low Vision (LV)

###### *Intellectual Disability*

Down's Syndrome  
Autism

People belonging to marginalised sections of society or Economically / Socially (EcoSoc) weak segment:

Communities who do not get employment opportunities easily i.e. North Eastern States, Bihar, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Orissa, etc.

Widowed / abandoned / women escaping domestic abuse

Orphans

Below the poverty line (BPL) individuals

Individuals from economically weak families

#### **Challenges, Sensitization and Building Organisational Culture**

The employees completely resisted the PWD hiring initiative, assuming that it would burden them with additional work as PWDs would not be capable of efficiently performing. The first steps for creating accessible environments for PWDs is making people aware and challenging negative attitudes (AIF, 2014). Disability being seen as a social stigma in India, through sensitisation training, mental barriers were overcome- staff/ managers were sensitised about disability in general and also specific disabilities and how as team members/ managers they could work with people with different disabilities. Each Lemon Tree employee is required to learn sign language and skills to communicate with PWDs. This task is

interaction and focus was specifically to employ speech and hearing impaired (SHI) people. This helped in developing standard operating procedures and training modules in a repetitive fashion. In the next step EWD services were extended to areas like restaurants requiring guest interaction which was made possible by altering processes and imparting requisite trainings. Later staff with orthopaedic impairment, Down's syndrome and autism was inducted; learning and experience are created from hiring to build processes and training modules and then it is scaled up across properties.

#### **Focus of Lemon Tree on 'Opportunity Deprived Indians'**

Lemon Tree believes that persons with disabilities must be given equal opportunities to realize their full potential and has created an enabling environment in the organization for the physically challenged. Lemon Tree actively employs people with disabilities who work in various departments like Housekeeping, Food & Beverage Service etc. The Lemon Tree group has identified 'Opportunity Deprived Indians' as its prospective employees and employs people with physical disability and also persons belonging to the economically weaker/marginalized sections of society.

ongoing and particularly challenging as the hotel industry is characterised with a high turnover rate and new people join each month. Now having employee teams with EWDs is a norm rather than an exception at Lemon tree and differently abled persons are welcomed by employees who take pride in the initiative for positive social impact.

Job mapping needs to be done for each role to identify as to which tasks can be handled by people of a certain disability and which tasks will be difficult to do due to limitations of the disability. This is a very challenging and important process on which depends the success of the program.

#### **Source of recruitment of PWDs**

The company works with several NGOs involved with the PWDs and disadvantaged people

and also relevant government departments to hire ODIs. Lemon Tree also makes prospective employees and their families aware of opportunity for PWDs to take up employment and get a chance to lead a dignified independent life.

### Training and Progression Opportunities

EWDs do not just keep working at the lowest levels but they are provided with trainings necessary to move forward in the organisation. No special roles are created for these employees but they are fitted into usual job profiles after job mapping, making adjustments and imparting skills accordingly e.g. a disadvantaged background deaf employee having worked for four years in Lemon Tree has risen to F& B service supervisor level and is leading a team.

Regular skilling of EWDs is done through customised trainings suiting their specific needs to ensure that they progress and are not left behind in the organisation e.g. specialised videos with sign language are created to aid training for processes in F&B service and housekeeping areas which further help understanding tasks and improve productivity. Lemon tree has experienced that these employees learn well and if trained appropriately are as competent as able bodied employees.

### Compensation

EWDs are provided with valuable trainings to appropriately skill and make them employable and this requires substantial investments. With these training and experience at Lemon Tree, these employees who are paid slightly less than the going market rates are able to move to other companies at double salaries within a few years. Hence EWDs at

Lemon Tree are well compensated via the trainings, work experience and salary that they receive.

### Modifications required in systems

The approach of Lemon Tree was, as to how to make disabilities irrelevant. Lemon Tree hotel buildings allow easy access to all people as they are designed to be universally accessible and also have special suites for differently abled guests.

EWDs wear cards which introduce the employee and sensitise the guest, simple modifications are done in tasks to be carried out e.g. items in the menu have been numbered so that orders can be easily placed. Also EWDs carry pads & pens and guests can write down requests if required. These simple modifications make the guest experience very positive and appreciating. Also all EWDs have with them whistles to use in case of any emergency like fire.



(Source: Lemon Tree Hotels)



(Source: Lemon Tree Hotels)

**Reasons and advantages of hiring PWD observed at Lemon Tree**

The massive scale on which the Lemon Tree group has employed PWDs itself shows the benefits of employing them. Had there been no benefits and only costs to the company, it could not have been sustainable and grown to the level where it has. The group has observed benefits from this policy at various levels. The initiative has resulted in improving the creativity of teams and there is increased employee engagement – PWDs are very hardworking, committed and sincere employees e.g. in areas like housekeeping Lemon Tree observes that SHI employees are more productive than other employees and in restaurants, having higher power of observations, hearing-impaired employees' notice guests who need help much before others. Employing PWDs often improves service quality, efficiency and reduces service cost since it impacts the attitude of the entire workforce. From absolute resistance to the initiative, employees now take pride and derive satisfaction being part of the positive contribution leading to high morale.

Hospitality sector is characterised by a very high employee turnover rate of about 60 %, while EWDs have a much lower turnover rate of about 25 % which reduces the company's training- recruitment pressure and expenses. And the PWD turnover is actually desirable by the company as they train them while paying a little less than the market rate and after this work experience EWDs find employment in other companies at double salaries which then results in hiring more PWDs and making them employable. By being open to employing PWDs, the company in this high attrition sector gets access to huge numbers of prospective employees who have been written off by others.

The approach builds the brand immensely giving it a competitive edge and consumer loyalty. Guests / public is made aware of this unique social impact initiative through media, social media platforms, company website, in the hotel lobbies and rooms. Also employees and managers are trained to convey guests the positive social inclusion work and other environmentally friendly practices of the company. Lemon Tree has experienced much appreciation and support of guests who have given excellent feedback and sometimes even named EWD who serviced them. The guests patronise the company by being loyal and repeat guests and also recommend the brand- they enjoy the benefit of being a part of social impact by choosing to stay/ dine/ recommend the company.

The initiative helps people from deprived and ignored sections to lead a dignified life of independence and self reliance. In a country like India where negative attitude prevails towards PWDs, disability is seen as a social stigma, made fun of in a derogatory manner, PWDs seen mostly as good for nothing people and not accepted readily and pitied upon, this is a huge service in changing attitudes leading the way for others to follow.

**Findings**

From first hiring two PWDs in 2006, Lemon Tree has come a long way and now boasts of 21 % opportunity deprived Indians on its rolls which it aims to take to the audacious level of 40% by 2025. The group is expanding fast and from its present 5,000 employees it aims to double its workforce to 10,000 in about three/ four years. This means that from its present about 1,000 ODI employees, it will take this number to about 4,000 to make it 40% of about 10,000 projected workforces. Hence in the coming years a large number of ODIs will be recruited by the group. Lemon Tree's senior vice-president of operations, Sumant Jaidka, says he aspires that a hearing-impaired person reaches the level of general manager in the company.

The company is growing and expanding and is a successful viable entity and it is obvious that it is benefitting from hiring differently and is not doing so as a charity or as part of CSR. It is a strategic business decision for the group and has become its business model and part of its corporate culture. The Vice President (sustainability), Lemon Tree group says that "hiring PWDs makes enormous business sense for us.

This case shows several advantages enjoyed by Lemon Tree Hotels by employing PWDs. They generally excel at their work, are hard working, very focussed, often have higher productivity due to less distractions, more enthusiasm with a sense of gratitude, and are extremely loyal with low attrition rates. Employing PWDs also helps build a positive public image of the brand with much appreciation from the guests. Repeat guests of Lemon tree acknowledge its inclusive staff as a reason for their patronising the group.

**Conclusion**

Employment of PWDs may require certain adjustments and putting in place initial infrastructure and systems but offers long term advantages for the company. Hotel companies should not consider employing PWDs just to fulfil their CSR component/ social obligation rather they need to take it up as a strategy for robust Human Resources management and gaining competitive advantage in hospitality industry characterised by high attrition rate. This case shows that employing persons with disabilities and the objective of profit need not be mutually exclusive; rather it can be a mutually beneficial partnership.

**Implications and Suggestions**

Hospitality companies and other employers can draw upon this best practice and rich experience of the Lemon Tree group in developing an inclusive model without compromising on revenue/ profits. The private sector in India has the capability to be an agent of change and mainstream differently abled people.

**Limitations**

Study is limited to only one hospitality company and best practices of other companies in this area can be studied.

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