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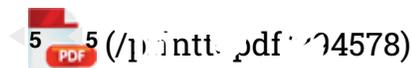
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How millennials can transform the hospitality industry

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For some time, the hotel industry has focused on building hotels that cater to the preferences of the millennial generation. The next challenge is hiring those millennials to run the hotels we built for them.



By Shreyas "J.R." Patel
(/Author/294577/Shreyas-JR-Patel)



Hospitality staffing. Those two words might make you cringe—and, in fact, they represent a real pain point for our industry. Staffing needs have evolved as our client base has changed, but the industry has adjusted in a painfully slow manner. On the bright side, there are more young people eager to join the industry than ever. And for the first time in decades, they have both the formal education and training for the job.

The hospitality industry has experienced growth for years, with record numbers of travelers on the move and thousands of rooms opening up. But the romanticism behind this growth is colliding with a stark reality: Collectively, we are all shorthanded. The industry used to churn out professionals who started in the industry during college, working night audits, then went on to become GMs who worked for two to three properties total in their careers. But the days of 20-plus-year or even 10-plus-year industry veterans are long gone.

Today, it's all about millennials on the customer front—something that affects our staffing as well. As an industry, we've spent a lot of time creating marketing campaigns to sell to millennials. We've changed our rooms to attract them and created brands to cater to their preferences. We've spent millions of dollars upgrading standard rooms to include amenities such as USB outlets to charge an arsenal of devices. We understand it's a generation that would rather text the front desk than call. But for as much as we know about millennials' consumer habits, we haven't quite figured out how to attract them as prospective employees. It's time to harness their digital savvy and lean on this next generation in hospitality leadership to “sell” the properties we've created for them.

Historically, individuals with formal training came from overseas, but we're now seeing higher learning institutions creating hospitality programs. For example, I sit on the hospitality advisory council at Chicago's DePaul University. The School of Hospitality Leadership sits within the Richard H. Driehaus College of Business and was established with a \$7.5-million gift from the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation. Since 2010, the school has been preparing students for leadership roles in hospitality by combining a broad business education with specific hospitality industry knowledge and training.

So, what does this mean for the hospitality industry? It means a hotel property manager or VP of operations might come across the resume of a 25-year-old who has no paid work experience but does have a degree in hospitality leadership. That's because millennials are being taught the hard skills in the classroom that we “veterans” may have first learned on the job.

To shape the next generation of leadership in the hospitality industry, we need to find roles that engage and challenge millennials and further the training they've gotten in school, while recognizing they're still young and new to the workforce. Internal training and mentor programs will be critical to helping them develop the soft skills vital to our industry. It's up to us to create the next generation of professionals and leaders who will drive the industry forward—today and tomorrow.

Shreyas “J.R.” Patel is the president and COO of Helix Hospitality, a hotel group based in Chicago with properties throughout the U.S. An alum of DePaul University, with a dual degree in finance and management, Patel founded Helix Hospitality after learning firsthand the ins and outs of running a hotel property. Over the last decade, Patel has overseen the expansion of Helix's network of hotels and has grown the company's investment portfolio from \$10 million to over \$100 million. Outside the office, Patel is committed to helping the next generation of hospitality professionals. In addition to mentoring undergraduate students, where he offers relatable, real-world advice and hands-on practical knowledge of the hospitality industry, Patel also serves as a board member for the DePaul University School of Hospitality Leadership and co-chairs the Academic Program subcommittee, further developing DePaul's Hospitality program.



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