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Welcoming THE WORLD

With guests from all over the globe, hotels utilize diverse staffs to roll out the red carpet

By Clare Morris
For Celebrating Diversity
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Imagine you're a Bosnian native — just arrived at your hotel in Atlanta — and you have a poor grasp of English. Even the simple acts of checking in, finding your room and ordering a meal can be an enormous challenge.

Multiply that one visitor by the thousands of world travelers who pass through Atlanta each year, and you'll have some idea of the challenges faced by the city's hospitality industry. Each day, hotel staffs around metro Atlanta serve guests whose customs and cultures are drastically different from American norms. Yet each one must be treated with consideration and courtesy.



BARRY WILLIAMS/Special

Erica Qualls, general manager of the Atlanta Marriott Marquis, says that it's important for her employees to be trained in cultural differences and customs in order to provide the service that guests expect.

It's a tall order but one that more hotels are addressing head-on — and not only because it's the gracious thing to do. It's also good business.

"I have a friend who says the color of diversity is green," said Kathleen Bertrand, senior vice president of community and governmental affairs for the Atlanta Convention & Visitors Bureau. "It's all about how we can better accommodate guests and clients, not only by being hospitable but to affect the bottom line. We want our guests to want to come back and want to tell someone else about their experience in Atlanta."

For the last several years, Bertrand has organized a diversity summit aimed at the city's hospitality industry. The next summit, scheduled for Feb. 28 and 29, will address diversity issues in all areas of the hospitality industry, including marketing, hiring and recruiting. National and local experts from the field will share their tips, many of which are already well-known by successful hoteliers who actively recruit a diverse work force.

"We have quite an international staff of about 330 employees," said Wendy Schmitt, director of human resources for the Four Seasons Hotel in Midtown. "We have more than 30 countries represented. You can walk through the hotel and hear Spanish, French . . . , Bosnian, Bulgarian, Vietnamese, Chinese and Swahili.

"It's not that often that you find a guest who doesn't speak English, but we do ask that question when we hire someone. We keep a list of who speaks what in case we have a need."

Language skills aren't the first criterion for getting a job at the Four Seasons, though.

"How you communicate can also come across in your facial expressions, tone of voice and body language," Schmitt said. "So we hire for attitude, and we train for skill."

Cultural training

Diversity also means having a sensitivity toward and appreciation for cultural differences. At the Atlanta Marriott Marquis, that ideal translates into training courses that expose employees to customs from around the world.

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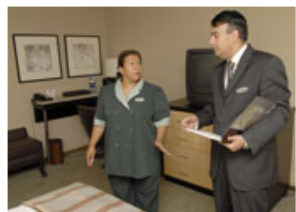
It's about having a guest from Japan and knowing whether you kiss, bow or shake hands," said Erica Qualls, the Marquis general manager. "It's about our chefs finding indigenous foods from a guest's country and including that in the buffet, or having someone come in and bless the kitchen so it's kosher.

"When a group comes in, our associates are conscientious about finding out what's important to them — what their needs are — and not stereotyping. We celebrate the diversity of every group that comes in contact with our associates."

Atlanta Marriott Marquis employees speak more than 25 languages, so training also involves learning another tongue — be it English or something else.

"We want our employees to feel comfortable in our inclusive work environment," Qualls said. "We teach work-specific English to help them communicate. And we also work with programs such as Rosetta Stone, so our leaders can talk to associates in their own language."

Qualls added that her company recruits with diversity in mind.



BARRY WILLIAMS/Special

Ash Awasthi, assistant rooms director at the Hyatt Regency Atlanta, talks with housekeeping trainer Lorena Garcia in one of the hotel's suites. Awasthi is from India, and Garcia is from Mexico.

"We always look for the best talent possible for the positions we need filled," she said. "But part of our accountability is making sure we have a diverse leadership team that mirrors who our customers are. I'm conscious of that when I'm working with local colleges, universities or chambers of commerce to find employees."

The human resources team at the Hyatt Regency Atlanta follows much the same policy when recruiting potential employees. They also recruit international trainees from hotel schools around the world.

"We end up with a very diverse culture," said LaTonya Hunter, assistant director of human resources. "We now have associates in our management training program from countries such as Vietnam, Germany and Croatia. Most of our trainees are well-versed in three or four languages — depending on where they're from — and that certainly helps with the ability to speak with guests."

Attracting employees

That commitment to diversity made Hyatt a desirable employer for Ash Awasthi, who grew up in New Delhi, India, and has been with the company for 12 years. He is the Hyatt Regency's assistant rooms

executive, overseeing daily room operations.

"Hyatt is known for its diversity," said Awasthi, who started his career in New Jersey and went to work in Houston before arriving in Atlanta three years ago. "I've seen other managers who came from other countries have good opportunities.

"And my path gives a lot of hope to people who know they'll have the same opportunities I've had in my career."

The Hyatt Regency's assistant executive housekeeper is Ibrahim Bozdogan, a native of Turkey, who started with the company six years ago in Atlanta.

"It was the culture of Hyatt that brought me here," he said. "I did an internship here and then worked as a security officer before moving into housekeeping. I see big opportunities for my future, and it doesn't matter what country you are from. Here, you can get promoted if you do your job right."

Hyatt works hard to establish a climate of respect among its employees. Hunter conducts workshops in which managers simulate how to react to a guest wearing a turban or a co-worker taking a break at a certain time of day to pray. The same workshops will be given to all associates beginning next year.

"The goal is to change people's actions at work," she said. "We have people coming in from all over the world, and it's great that we are able to have associates who can translate a welcome letter or greet them in their own language. We know we'll have guests who are going to need assistance. It's always a pleasure to be able to offer them exactly what they need."