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# Employment barriers for persons with disabilities in the hotel industry: A reality check

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EMPLOYMENT BARRIERS FOR PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES IN THE HOTEL INDUSTRY:  
A REALITY CHECK

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Abstract

This case study explores the validity of employment barriers regarding persons with disabilities put forward by the hotel industry. A number of employment barriers of employees with disabilities do not necessarily match the reality and seem unjustified. Artificial barriers such as the stigmatization and stereotypical thinking of persons with disabilities prevent these otherwise able individuals from fully participating in employment in the hotel industry. While the case study shows that employing and integrating large numbers of persons with (severe) disabilities in a very competitive market is possible, they remain severely disadvantaged at the workplace.

Keywords: disability, integrative model, hotel industry

Introduction

Despite often reported employment benefits such as greater creativity, motivation and loyalty of employees with disabilities there has been limited evidence that hotel organizations have pushed for greater employment participation and integration of this group into their workforces (Gröschl, 2007). The few studies that have explored the employment situation of persons with disabilities in the hotel industry have identified a number of arguments put forward by hotel managers and employees as to why persons with disabilities are less employable than persons without disabilities. Key arguments include the high costs of training and of accommodating any particular needs of persons with disabilities (Gröschl, 2007; Hammett, 2003), their limited cross-functional or multi tasking skills, and their potential mobility restrictions that could have a negative impact on night and shift works (Gröschl, 2007; Gröschl, 2005). Nickson et al. (2005) highlighted the hotel industry's preference for employees with aesthetic and self-presentation skills as a key employment barrier for persons with disabilities.

Despite these employment challenges for persons with disabilities, a group of 15 independent German hotels under the banner of the Embrace Verbund has employed an average of more than 60 percent of persons with disabilities in its operations. Using the Embrace hotels as its case study organization, this paper explores whether the above cited arguments concerning the (limited) employability of persons with disabilities are justified and correspond to reality.

Background and Context

This study follows Germany's legal definition of disabilities which can be found in §2 (1) of Book IX of the German Code of Social Law:

'People are disabled/handicapped when their physical function, their intellectual ability or their mental/psychological health deviates from the age-typical condition without much doubt for longer than six months and when therefore their participation in society is impaired' (European Commission: Public Health, 2008).

According to the 2008/9 annual report by Germany's Federal Association of the Integration Offices and Main Welfare Association (BIH) (2009: 9), in 2008 Germany had about 8,4 million people with disabilities, of which 6,9 million were categorized as having severe disabilities. The remaining 1.5 million were considered to have mild disabilities<sup>1</sup>. Germany's 2002 Equality for Disabled Persons Act and the 2006 Equal Treatment Act assure persons with disabilities protection from employment and workplace discrimination in the public and private sectors. Employers that train and employ individuals with severe disabilities might be entitled to subsidies. Private and public employers with more than 20 employees have to ensure that at least five percent of their workforce is comprised of employees with severe disabilities. In 2007, 131,919 companies had to comply with this employment law. While all 10,687 public employers fulfilled or exceeded this quota, 16,522 (13.6%) employers in the private sector achieved the five percent quota, 66,755 (55.1%) organizations employed between zero and five percent, and 37,955 (31.3%) firms employed no employees with severe disabilities at all (BIH, 2009: 10). Employers who do not fulfil their employment obligations have to pay a contribution to the BIH which, in turn, provides financial and non-financial support structures for the employment (e.g. subsidies) and employability (e.g. training) of persons with disabilities in Germany's workforce. Despite the legal protection and financial support structures, in 2008 the unemployment rate for Germans with severe disabilities was 14.6% in comparison to 8.7% for Germans without disabilities (BIH, 2009: 12).

In Germany the idea behind any integrative organization is to create employment opportunities for persons with disabilities who do not find employment in the regular labour market. In 2006 eleven integrative hotels created the association of Embrace hotels. All Embrace hotels have been initiated by either a public / private parent institution from the social sector (e.g. Lebenshilfe), or by associations of parents of children with disabilities, with the aim to provide individuals with disabilities employment opportunities and professional perspectives. As an integrative hotel organization, each Embrace member hotel is committed to employ at least 60-65 percent of people with disabilities, of which around 25 percent are employees with severe disabilities. The concept of integration also means barrier-free (physical and social) environments in both the guest and employee sections of the hotels. While one of the founding objectives was the creation of a meeting or melting pot for individuals with and without disabilities, today the integrative organizations' overall aim is the economical profitability of their operations. Currently the group includes 15 hotels with 452 rooms throughout Germany. The hotels range from business and conference hotels to spa/wellness and family hotels. Amongst the 253 employees there are 159 persons with disabilities.

## Methodology

Considering the exploratory nature of this project, a case study approach seemed the most appropriate research design (Palys, 2003). Due to financial and time constraints, five Embrace member hotels were selected according to accessibility and convenience as case sample hotels (Judd, Smith, and Kidder, 1991). As this study addressed complex and constructivist elements (e.g. value and belief systems, stereotypes and perceptions) semi-structured in-depth interviews were chosen as the key data collection methods (Denzin, 1989). Interviews conducted with the hotel directors and head of departments included questions about personal and company backgrounds, organizational performance results, HR related practices and processes regarding the attraction and integration of their employees with and without disabilities, the interaction between employees with and without disabilities, the interaction with and reactions of clients, and the challenges and opportunities of running an integrative hotel. The interviews with clients focused on the reasons for coming to the participating hotels, as well as their experiences in terms of product and service quality, interaction between employees with and without

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<sup>1</sup> The categorizations are based on a grade from 20 to 100, which indicate the limitations of participation in daily activities due to a disability. Severe disabilities are defined as participation limitations of more than 50. Mild disabilities are defined as participation limitations of less than 50 (Bundesarbeitsgemeinschaft der Integrationsaemter und Hauptfuersorgestellen, 2009).

disabilities, and the interaction between employees with and without disabilities and the clients. Due to the different types of disabilities (e.g. physical, mental, learning, psychological) the questioning structure of the interviews with employees with disabilities was kept loose, and was briefly discussed with the hotel director before each interview. The following table shows the number of participants.

Table 1: Interviewees and number of interviewees

Interviewees	No. of Interviewees
Hotel Directors	5
Head of Departments	7
Employees with disabilities	8
Employees without disabilities	7
Guests with disabilities	7
Guests without disabilities	15

Interviews ranged between 15 minutes to two hours and were recorded with handwritten notes. After each interview the notes were translated into English and transferred into a word document.

In the data analysis the author used the interview questions as the basis for developing categories. From these categories text segments from the interviews and the observations were carved out of their context by the author in such a way that they retained their meaning (Tesch, 1992). Through a cut and paste approach the author re-contextualised text segments into appropriate topics. The preparation and interpretation of the data were conducted manually and the author developed a strong relationship to the data. This relationship provided the basis for treating the data in an interpretative way. Using clear methodological justifications and appropriate, multiple research methods the truthfulness of the project’s findings was assured and the interpretative validity of the data was provided (Walsh, 2003).

### Key Findings and Discussion

The sample organizations had between 13 to 36 rooms and between 24 to 192 beds. None of the interviewed general managers had a disability. Two of the directors came from the hotel industry while the other three managers have previously been employed by social services in the private and semi-public sectors. All directors had trained and experienced hotel employees without disabilities in their management and operational teams. On average the participating Embrace hotels had ten percent higher occupancy rates than their direct local competitors. One Embrace hotel, for example, had an occupancy rate of 82 percent in comparison to 58 percent of its key competitors. In all participating hotels the market share for guests with disabilities was below 35 percent. Guests with disabilities specifically chose Embrace hotels because of a) the barrier-free environment and the accommodating facilities, and b) their disabilities were not put in the foreground by the employees. Guests without disabilities stayed at integrative hotels either because of a) the location and the price/service ratio of the hotel, b) the opportunity to meet persons with disabilities, or c) because certain features and facilities not only better accommodate the needs of persons with disabilities but also their own particular requirements (e.g. families with small kids appreciated the barrier free environment for their strollers). Regardless of the ‘integrative’ aspect most of the clients did not feel they stayed in a hotel that was operated by persons with disabilities.

In the start up phase the sample integrative hotels were financially supported by either a public / private institution in the social sector (e.g. Lebenshilfe), or by associations of parents of children with disabilities - a

business practice that is also common in the non-integrative hotel sector. Today none of these integrative hotels have received financial support from their founders – each integrative hotel operated independently. At the same time, the sample integrative hotels received a governmental wage subsidy for each of their employees with disabilities to compensate for any performance gaps that exist due their disabilities. The governmental aids in form of wage subsidies can be requested by any private business that employs persons with disabilities. And any wage subsidy for an employee with disability compensates only for his performance gap, and does not bring a financial or any other form of competitive advantage. The criticism by non-integrative hotels of being financially disadvantaged against Embrace members does not uphold.

On the contrary, many non-integrative hotels (groups) have clear competitive advantages in the start up phase and long-term in comparison to their integrative hotel counterparts. Many non-integrative hotels and hotel groups can refer to stronger and better developed logistical and human resources support and infrastructures beyond the start up phase due to their scope, size and experience (e.g. world-wide reservation systems). While Embrace hotels were founded by institutions in the social sector with no or very limited hotel industry experience, large hotel groups can bring years of managerial and operational hotel experiences to the opening of a new hotel unit. Every sample hotel was barrier free and employed at least 60 percent of persons with disabilities. The different types of disabilities often depended on the founding parent institution or association from which many of the employees with disabilities were transferred or recruited. Most of the disabilities of Embrace's employees were of a mental or psychological nature. In particular learning disabilities were frequent amongst employees of the Embrace hotels. Few employees had physical disabilities which limited their mobility, while the severity of some employees' disabilities limited their ability to work long shifts. The majority of disabilities had no impact on an individual's mobility or shift work. This finding questions the argument put forward by many managers without disabilities that persons with disabilities lack mobility and cannot do night and shift work. Furthermore, any pre-accepted performance gaps such as limited mobility or shift work could be compensated with governmental financial aids.

The interviewed directors and employees without disabilities agreed on the importance of managers being socially competent, having good interpersonal skills, being patient, proactive and anticipative when it comes to working in an integrative hotel. For example, predicting and managing potential causes of stress such as process and structural changes helped employees, in particular with mental disabilities, in their daily work routines: For many of the employees with mental disabilities clear workplace arrangements and routines were crucial in their daily activities. Considering that that stress related consequences (e.g. absenteeism) cost companies in the US 300 billion dollars in 2006 (Brun), anticipating and limiting stress is not only an important accommodating practice for certain disabilities, but helps Embrace's managers to keep the overall stress related costs down.

For employees with Down syndrome, managers developed detailed task and process descriptions, and well familiarized structures and repetitive tasks. Employees who could not read were helped with colours and symbols describing their tasks. New activities or changes and modifications to current job routines were introduced slowly through continuous repetitions and training. And for employees with Down Syndrome who often dislike impersonal objects, many machines in the participating hotels such as vacuum cleaners carried names. Managers agreed that sharing their hospitality experience and social sector specific know-how has often lead to low-cost solutions to the day-to-day employment challenges of persons with disabilities.

These experiences are in contrast to the existing views held by many managers without disabilities that the costs of the accommodation of employees and their disabilities are large. Providing names to objects and describing tasks with symbols and colours are of minimal financial costs to employers. Not only are these workplace changes accommodating for certain types of disabilities but also serve to simplify the lives of co-workers without disabilities

and guests with and without disabilities. Employees with limited local language skills might find it helpful to use colours as a means of communicating job tasks, while a lower desk for an employee in a wheelchair ensures greater front desk accessibility for clients such as children and older persons.

As the recruitment pool for managers was limited to their hotels' founding parents, many of the applicants with disabilities had no hospitality background. The lack of skills and knowledge required managers to provide financial and non-financial investments for training their employees with disabilities. This confirms to some extent the perception by managers without disabilities that employees with disabilities might have large training needs that are costly. It is important, however, to add that this is not only due to their disabilities, but mainly due to their lack of hotel work experiences. Furthermore, hotel employers can use their governmental financial aids to support their training initiatives for persons with disabilities. For many of them this training not only helps in acquiring new skills but also builds confidence and gradually allows the undertaking of more responsibilities. Greater performance creates more self confidence and provides the basis for developing more cross-functional and multi-tasking skills. Considering their strong sense of loyalty and long-term commitment (in one hotel employees worked on average 16 years for their hotel), devoting resources and time to training persons with disabilities can turn the training costs into long-term investment.

With regard to the perceptions of persons with disabilities' aesthetic and self-presentation skills (see Nickson et al., 2005), in this study none of the participants shared nor confirmed the views that the physical attractiveness or attributes of employees with disabilities might have an impact on their performances or influence guests' experiences. The findings of this study indicate that many of the employment challenges of persons with disabilities put forward by employers of non-integrative hotels seem largely to be based on perceptions and stereotypes that cannot be generalized. Many interviewed managers explained that to some extent the performance and the success of an employee with a disability would depend on what stage in his life his disability started, and the skill sets and competencies he acquired before his disability and retained despite the disability (e.g. disability at birth, disability as a result of an accident, progressive disabilities such as multiple sclerosis). This implies that managers have to consider every disability on a case by case basis and conduct a detailed analysis of the employee's abilities and competencies required by the job.

Greater integration of employees with disabilities requires artificial barriers in the form of perceptions and stereotypical thinking to be identified and dealt with early on. Managers need to remove all physical and social barriers that have evolved from indifference, ignorance and fear. Managers and employees - with or without disability - need to share the same business objectives and a common vision. These shared common goals amongst all employees could contribute to the development of a strong and unified organizational culture that is needed to put the employees with disabilities at the centre of many managerial and operational processes and procedures.

### Conclusions and Limitations

Despite all the legal efforts and governmental programs and initiatives promoting equal access to employment for persons with disabilities, the latter remain severely disadvantaged in their daily lives and at the workplace. Artificial barriers such as the stigmatization and stereotypical thinking of persons with disabilities prevent these otherwise able individuals from fully participating in employment in many different sectors including the hotel industry. This study has shown that a number of hotel industry related employment barriers of employees with disabilities do not necessarily match the reality and seem unjustified, and that employing and integrating large numbers of persons with (severe) disabilities in a very competitive market is possible. Any form of integration of persons with disabilities requires organizational changes - starting with an organization's vision to its business and HR strategies, to its operational policies and processes. This needs to be complemented with awareness building led

by top management, with transparent and clear communication to all stakeholders inside and outside the organization. Organizational changes concerning the integration of persons with disabilities should be justified with clear business case objectives and arguments. It should be recognized that persons with disabilities desire to be recruited because of their abilities and not because of their disabilities.

This study should be seen as a starting point to spark more discussions amongst academics and practitioners regarding the integration of persons with disabilities in the non-integrative hotel sector. More research of non-integrative hotel organizations could provide greater insights in terms of the employment challenges and barriers for persons with disabilities seeking employment in the hotel sector. Due to the importance of the legal context and local financial support and incentive structures more research could be conducted in different countries and regions. The qualitative nature of this study could be completed with more quantitative oriented research designs. Data collection tools such as surveys might provide different responses or perspectives from clients due to the anonymity of the participants. Some respondents in this study might have responded according to the societal norms and expectations rather than sharing their true beliefs and assumptions.

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