

Hotels seek help to meet 85pc Omanisation target

Hospitality industry not considered an attractive career option by citizens

Ruqaya al Bimany
Muscat

Hospitality industry professionals are calling on the Ministry of Manpower to provide more help in order to reach the Omanisation target set in 2009. At the start of 2009, a target of 85 per cent Omanisation by the end of 2010 was set for the industry. Halfway into the time period, hotels in particular feel the target is unrealistic. With only two training institutes in Oman, the National Hospitality Institute (NHI) and Oman Tourism College, there is a lot of pressure on hotels to find trained Omanis within the stipulated time period.

York Brandes, general manager, The Chedi, who is also on the board of NHI explained that they need support from the ministry to provide more training to Omanis. "Most of the five star hotels are in the region of 55-60 per cent Omanisation. To increase this by another 20 per cent is virtually impossible. It will work in the long term, but cannot be achieved within 12 months. None of us wish to poach staff off one another, so unless someone is unemployed we cannot recruit them." The problem is, added Brandes, that there is a big demand for Omani workers and not enough of them are trained.

The number of Omanis that have so far been trained at NHI is 5,200 and the number required



to be trained in order to meet the Omanisation target is an additional 4,500. "If we look at spas as an example, we never find Omanis who do massages and there is also the problem of specialist chefs. If we take those into consideration then the 15 per cent allowance to hire expatriates will not be enough," said Brandes.

Hoteliers are also concerned about a fine that will be levied if they do not hit the 85 per cent target. For instance, if an establishment is short of 100 people, then it would be fined equivalent to half of the annual salaries that the Omanis would be earning in those jobs.

Another issue that the professionals raised is that most Omanis wish to work for the government as the hours are shorter and there are other guaranteed benefits.

"Firstly, the hospitality industry is not considered to be a sector you take pride in here and the other issue is that you have to work night shifts and on public holidays, which doesn't make it very attractive," said Christoph K Franzen, general manager, Grand Hyatt Muscat. He feels the biggest challenge is the small pool of people available within the industry that must be shared between the current hotels and the ones that are under development. "In defence of the ministry, firstly we all knew this was coming and secondly there has been a step-by-step approach. The problem is not in the percentage, it's in the availability of the labour pool. We don't have enough local talent who want to join the hospitality business, which makes it hard for hotels to reach their target," he said.

Currently three star hotels only have a target of 50 per cent Omanisation. "I would assume that there are more three star hotels across Oman than there are five-star ones, so it would be easier for them to hit the target," said Jennie Snook, sales and marketing officer, NHI. Jennie also explained that the Ministry of Manpower currently binds those who have been trained, to a 12-month employment contract within the field, otherwise they must repay their training fees.

Some hotels are investing more in their staff in order to boost retention rates and build a sense of loyalty. "The next challenge which we are addressing along with NHI is to train our staff as managers, by identifying the people with potential and sending them on specialised courses," added Franzen.