

Lessons from European hospitality: how many people does it take to change a light bulb?

 By [Guy Stehlik](#)

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Having had the good fortune of spending a few days in Europe recently as well as having worked there in the early days of my hospitality career, one thing became overwhelmingly clear: hotel and hospitality staff abroad are efficient and hotels are largely managed efficiently.



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Case in point: I was hosted at a four-star luxury 80 room, full-service hotel in Paris. The hotel had only nine permanent staff. I kid you not! The person who checked me in was the very same person who handles reservations, who is also the duty manager, concierge, and front desk manager, but most incredibly, he still found enough time to talk to and engage with the guests. My keen interest in the working of any hotel operation got me making inquiries: nine permanent staff on their books, the housekeeping service is outsourced and there are no limitations on casual staff and all are accessible, well-trained, efficient staff.

A career in hospitality in Europe and the USA is highly respected and recognised as an honorable profession. Training in this field is acute, education levels are good. Waiter and waitress staff, hotel service personnel and front of house staff are employed based on training received and years of experience in the industry. The result is that owning a hotel in Europe is a highly lucrative business, especially with a streamlined, multi-talented staff whose salaries comprise a mere 12-15% of the expenses, as opposed to 30-35% as in South Africa!

So just how many people does it take to change a lightbulb?

At BON Hotels, we are fulfilled knowing that we are creating jobs. With South Africa's high unemployment rate, we as business owners are responsible for job creation. Given our current economic situation, our need to create jobs has magnified in importance.

In the SA hotel industry, we maximise our staff compliment and habitually 'throw' people at a problem; the detriment here is that this does not always result in an efficient staff structure. Financially, it would seem that we should opt for the slimmer margins observed in Europe, but not all business decisions can be financial, or rather micro-financial. After all, we have an economy here that desperately needs supporting. We have a duty to create employment, but at the same time, we must

then generate profit.

Training, training, training

My conclusion – and the only possible solution – is training. Train your staff meticulously, and when they qualify, train them again. We have a strict policy at BON Hotels that our team is trained every day and simultaneously, our team act as trainers every day. Housekeeping staff is trained and refreshed, service staff is trained on menus and wine lists, cocktail concoctions and silver service. Our HR policies and blueprints are followed to the tee, high up on our operational priority list.

In the words of Tim Minchin: "even if you are not a teacher, be a teacher. Don't take your education for granted, rejoice in what you learn and spray it."

ABOUT GUY STEHLIK

Guy Stehlik is the CEO and founder of BON Hotels and Director of BON Hotels International West Africa. Having vast experience in all aspects of Hotel Management as well as having owned his own hotels, Guy created BON Hotels as an "owner-staff-community-guest" centric company to herald in and define an exciting new era in hotel management.

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