

PROFESSIONALISM - THE MISSING LINK TO HOSPITALITY SUCCESS IN SUB SAHARAN AFRICA

Hospitality growth must be supported by world class service

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While the hospitality industry is poised for takeoff, what is missing is Africa's professional service delivery. Lack of qualified and competent personnel to meet the demands of existing and incoming hotel organizations poses the most challenge in this competitive market. The skill gap in the region has been identified, amongst others, as one of the leading drawbacks facing this multifaceted industry. Both governments and public sectors must examine the critical shortage of qualified staff without which the competitiveness of the industry cannot be sustained. Success in hotels does not depend on price alone but mainly on the quality of service and amenity standards offered to guests. It does not make sense that while African countries suffer from joblessness in other industries, the promising and dynamic hospitality industry suffers from shortage of qualified staff. Without a pool of trained personnel in management, operations and customer service including world class chefs, any country's economy and its people will not be able to fully benefit from the tourism experience for as long as professionals have to be imported from overseas at a high price tag.

It is commonly known that the price of hotels in Sub Saharan Africa are much higher compared to those in developed tourist destinations such as the Americas, Europe, UAE and Asia. The reasons for this are complex. Historically, African governments used to be the dominant owners of nationalized corporations (locally known as parastatals). Virtually all of those corporations failed due to incompetence and corrupt practices. Today, progressive governments have disengaged from running these corporations some of which were once thriving hotels. Private organizations are either moving in to take over these superstructures or constructing new hotels to fill the gap. Either way, renovation or construction of a hotel property in Africa from ground up poses unique challenges. It carries with it procurement complexities, land acquisition and sourcing for the right materials. Hotel operators have to figure out how to create their own infrastructure such as generating power and installing water storage systems. Other challenges may include political instability, currency exchange fluctuations and absence of strong regulations.

Overall, the region's outlook seems bright as leaderships work to tackle these problems head on. Leading companies entering the industry such as Swiss International, Hiltons Group, Marriott, Accor, Carlson Rezidor, Intercontinental, Mangalis, Louvre Hotels Group, Protea Hotels, City Blue Hotels and Kempinski have thwarted these obstacles and set up shop with increasing optimism. These companies are finding academically qualified candidates locally who lack the necessary hotel skills and experience. In the absence of experienced employees, they set up costly in-house training classes and workshops for their individual properties while importing skilled staff to kick off operations. Shortage of local trained personnel is avoidable and must not be added to other costly challenges. Importing personnel (and materials) simply drives up the cost of doing business in Africa compared to other parts of the world.

External recruitment will continue in the foreseeable future as each country develops its own human resource base through knowledge transfer. In order to deal with the acute shortages of manpower in this industry, countries that do best will be those with governments that are flexible and adaptable to

the changes needed by building partnerships in training and education. Global investments and institutional participation will help the region in a variety of ways. For instance, it will encourage the uplifting and harmonization of professional standards. It will also elevate the spirit of entrepreneurship where students will not only consider employment but also venture out in self-employment across the hospitality and tourism value chain. This will be more evident when governments can go a step further by including hospitality and tourism education in their public school curricula. Other alternatives may include setting up incubator facilities for start-ups or provide support for struggling, cash strapped private schools. Governments, as facilitators, must also consider the Public Private Partnership approach at this opportune time when global institutional investors are scouting Sub Saharan Africa to tap into the training opportunities. These opportunities are not confined to funding but also provision of advisory services and technical assistance that can increase the creditworthiness of existing training programs. The success of Utalii College in Kenya is attributed to such deliberate global collaborations and visionary execution.

Successful institutions are likely to those who construct schools in Africa or work with local stakeholders to modernize existing centers on the ground rather than operating from afar. Setting up shop in Africa provides firsthand knowledge of the culture and markets in the region and being able to customize service for emerging domestic tourism. Tapping into a pool of trained and experienced African diaspora workforce has proven to be useful for many foreign companies entering Africa. Some of the well-known global schools operating in Africa today include Swiss International School for Hotel and Tourism management, Vatel International Hotel and Tourism Management and Les Roches University. They have opened up schools in Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Rwanda, Angola and working on new projects in other enabling countries.

The recent Africa Hotel Investment Forum (AHIF) in Rwanda highlighted the immense opportunities, challenges and possible solutions in the developing hospitality industry in Sub Saharan Africa. It is a forum that brings together global investors as well as private and public stakeholders in the industry and also allowing individual countries to showcase the potential and their plans in the sector. Leading consulting groups like W Group, HTI, JLL and others specializing in the African hospitality outlook agree that that sector is bound to grow and attract more domestic and global investments. JLL Sub Saharan Africa, a consulting group, predicts that the sector will grow by 3 to 5% per annum. This optimism is first, due to the enormous potential with Africa's rich natural and cultural resources. Secondly, leading tourism destinations such as South Africa, Kenya, Ghana, Tanzania, Rwanda and others elsewhere are doing a lot to improve infrastructure, health, hygiene and security along with introducing supportive policies and regulations. These countries are also engaged in combating currency fluctuations. It is also important to note that as Africa moves away from total dependency on commodity exports, hospitality and tourism has been identified as key to sustainable economic diversification accompanied by investor confidence. This is particularly true for the formerly oil dependent nations such as Nigeria and Angola whose economies have been adversely affected by the plummeting oil prices.

Therefore, professionalism is urgently needed in this industry. Hospitality world class service does not just happen. It has to be achieved through strategically planned training and targeted linkages which deliver services that guests have come to expect.

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