

Industry perspective: A human resource manager's insights into hospitality in New Zealand: Lizzy Coughlan

Tracy Harkison and Lizzy Coughlan

Tracy Harkison is an associate professor, and programme leader of the Bachelor of International Hospitality Management at AUT. Her research passions are hospitality education and the co-creation of luxury accommodation experiences.



Lizzy Coughlan is the Human Resources Manager of the Hotel Britomart, Auckland.



The last two years have been incredibly challenging for the domestic and international hospitality industry. To gain insights from New Zealand hospitality professionals who are also AUT alumni, Lizzy Coughlan, Human Resource Manager of the Hotel Britomart, Auckland, was interviewed by AUT's Associate Professor Tracy Harkison.

When Coughlan was asked about working in hospitality, she responded:

I love hospitality because daily you encounter so many different types of people, it is a family feel industry. You meet people from around the world, so it gives you so much exposure to different life experiences. I am a people person, and it has been an industry I have loved ever since I started at AUT. I wanted to be in an industry where people are the main subject, and hospitality is that industry to a tee.

When asked about the unique aspects of the New Zealand hospitality industry, she explained:

We have a lot of history. Hotels are learning more about Māori heritage and incorporating it into their establishments. New Zealand is a unique travel destination, from the mountains and snow in Queenstown to the big city feel in Auckland. With such diversity we appeal to a wide range of travellers world-wide.

When Coughlan was asked why someone should start a career in hospitality and what advice she would give, her view was that:

People often don't realise that within hospitality it's not just the operational roles you can do, it's everything from revenue management through to HR. There are so many different things you can be exposed to within hospitality. It's not just waiting tables, cleaning dishes and being a chef; careers wise you can move up very quickly in hospitality into a different field that you may not have thought of before.

Coughlan stressed the importance of starting from the entry level.

Start in the industry at an entry position. It gives you the understanding of how a hotel operates; you can go through lots of different departments. It gives you the skills that you need in a management role, as you understand the facets of the business and you can be a very effective leader. Studying and gaining a degree will

serve your career very well. My best piece of advice is to just get in the door and work your way from there.

When Coughlan was asked about her greatest leadership challenge, the COVID-19 situation, and what she would change about the industry, she emphasised passion and being agile:

In hospitality you have a lot of very passionate people, and everyone has very different leadership styles. So, it is about understanding how best to lead when you have different personalities and styles to content with. So, my greatest leadership challenge has been understanding all the different leadership styles and then trying to figure out how to work with them, especially within a HR function role, because it can be challenging at times. But the more you understand them, the more you learn, and the easier it gets.

For COVID-19 our biggest decision was first and foremost the health and safety of our team and our guests. We took the stance that we need to take care of our people first, and then we made the business decisions from there. One thing remained throughout lockdown – taking care of our team and making sure they were supported. It was also about being really agile, as things were changing daily, and you have got to have a Plan A and a Plan B. So being agile and take it from there.

However, she also warned of the dangers of the industry, advising of ways to preserve one's work-life balance.

The industry is going through a huge transformation with a new generation of workers coming through. We are seeing a lot more people wanting, and rightfully so, more fair pay, more flexibility, more work life balance. Within traditional hospitality there is the mentality that you sometimes work long hours, so industry really needs to become more agile and open minded to different ways. We can approach work life balance by working from home, but within the parameters of an operational business, that is what I would like to see more of.

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