

# Industry perspective: A General Manager's insights of hospitality in New Zealand: Eliesa Fifita

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## Tracy Harkison and Eliesa Fifita

Dr Tracy Harkison is a Senior Lecturer at the School of Hospitality & Tourism, Auckland University of Technology, New Zealand.



Eliesa Fifita is the general manager of the IBIS Budget hotel in Auckland. Eli studied at the Queenstown Resort College (QRC) and has worked in New Zealand for 10 years in a variety of management positions for ACCOR.



This year has been one of the most challenging to date for New Zealand and the global hospitality industry. As part of a wider study of gaining insights from New Zealand hospitality professionals into this year, and the challenges they have faced, a series of interviews are being conducted. In this first interview, conducted in November 2020, Dr Tracy Harkison interviewed Eliesa Fifita, General Manager (GM) of the IBIS Budget Auckland Central. Questions were asked ranging from his passion for working in hospitality, through to his hopes for the future for hospitality in New Zealand.

*Tracy Harkison*

What do you love about working in hospitality?

**Eliesa Fifita**

It is simple, it's about helping guests, helping others and being part of that journey with customers or suppliers, making that connection with them, helping them on their worst days or enjoying their best days too and being able to go home and share that with others. At the same time, you get paid for it and you get great satisfaction -grow as a person and understand the world as it is.

*Tracy*

Are there unique aspects to the New Zealand hospitality industry?

**Eliesa**

From my perspective [hotels], yes, the culture is unique and only New Zealand can do it. We are known as having that laid-back attitude, but if we bring that New Zealand culture and we look deeply into it, it is that kind of Kiwi/Māori factor as well as the multiculturalism we have. Other countries have that but that is what is so unique about the hotel industry here, and it also gives opportunities. The work force in New Zealand hotels has a low percentage of Kiwis but this means that those who do work in the industry get to see the Kiwi side.

*Tracy*

Why start a career in hospitality?

**Eliesa**

That is a really good question. I remember going through QRC – you see the end goal and they get you to that end goal but it certainly was not easy but the

hospitality industry is totally worth it. The main thing is that it is not all about the pay check; it's about the journey you will take – you will meet many different people and that is one of the enjoyable parts. If you have the passion and drive to work hard, you will definitely get the rewards afterwards- and you need to show that you are willing to do the hard yards.

*Tracy*

When starting in the industry, what advice would you give?

**Eliesa**

You have to come with an open mind, and you have to be ready to work; it isn't easy, and you will need to work hard. But if you want to feel the raw emotions of that human connection, then this is what you would need to do: have an open mind and to work hard.

*Tracy*

What has been your greatest leadership challenge?

**Eliesa**

I have had so many, but at the moment it is COVID-19 and it is about taking the raw emotions out of it and having that business decision cap on – the decisions you are making will hurt people, will hurt families, but in the end your business will survive and you will be able to get them back on board, but later on. It has been painful from the emotional side- but in the end- you have to be upfront and honest to the people who are affected by it

*Tracy*

The COVID-19 situation – what was your decision-making process?

**Eliesa**

A lot of the decision making was not made by me; it was influenced by the government with their policies, and the company policies which were influenced by Europe – being such a big company as ACCOR is. For me, a lot of the decision making that I made was based on that and I had the support to do it. It was very hard, but we had a lot of structures which made it easier to decide – we were not running around like headless chickens trying to adapt.

*Tracy*

How would you change the New Zealand hospitality industry?

**Eliesa**

I have discussed this with a lot of people who work in the industry at a local government body role, right down to those who are coming through the industry – it is change that perspective. Give a little respect to the industry, and recognise that we are important; we play an important role. The other thing would be pay: pay people what they are worth. We are lucky to be in a country like New Zealand, but I think we do not get the recognition that we deserve as an industry. We need to start from the bottom and that starts with our workers and we need to recognise them more.

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