



# An exploration of HR policies and practices affecting the integration of persons with disabilities in the hotel industry in major Canadian tourism destinations

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## Abstract

This study explores how and in which areas current HR practices affect the employment of persons with disabilities in hotel organisations in key tourist destinations across Canada. Despite few HR initiatives in some of the participating hotels, overall, no best HR practices in this area as described in other industry sectors could be found. The complexity of defining disabilities, the limited legal pressure and control of providing employment opportunities for persons with disabilities, and the limited awareness, understanding, and communication between employees with and without a disability seem to limit the attraction and integration of persons with disabilities. Further, managers' preferences for aesthetic and self-presentation skills and a number of traditional hotel industry specific characteristics might hinder the recruitment of persons with disabilities. Employee selection criteria focusing on physical attractiveness and aesthetic skills need to be reviewed and realigned with ethical and non-discriminatory principles and guidelines. The development of a proactive strategy based on a sound business case, changes in areas such as communication and education, and closer cooperation with employment agencies could help hotels to demolish artificial barriers, stereotypes and perceptions of the employment of persons with disabilities.

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## 1. Introduction

Canadian hotel industry leaders and consultants have been optimistic and have predicted future growth for the accommodation industry (Pollard, 2003; Cooper, 2004). Yet, due to ‘severe shortages in talent across multiple key economic sectors’ (Hammett, 2003, p. 12), Canada’s highest employment rate since the 1980s boom (Little, 2003), and an ageing labour pool, hotel organisations could face strong competition for skilled and motivated employees. Experts have described and highlighted the serious labour (skill) shortages as one of the top challenges for Canada’s hotel industry (Coy, 2006; Tsapraillis, 2004).

In 2001<sup>1</sup> throughout Canada there were approximately 3.6 million Canadians—1 in 8 people—with some type of disability (Government of Canada, 2002). It was estimated that 9.9% of the total Canadian population were men and women with disabilities who were of working age (between 15 and 64) (Government of Canada, 2002). Despite the fact that ‘Canadian adults with disabilities are about two thirds as likely to have a postsecondary education as adults without disabilities’ (Government of Canada, 2002, p. 33), few of them are in full-time and permanent employment (Hammett, 2003). In light of the looming labour shortages in Canada’s hotel industry persons with disabilities could represent an important under-utilised labour source for hotel organisations.

According to Stone and Colella (1996) the HR function plays an important role in employing persons with disabilities. The two authors identified HR policies as being amongst the chief organisational variables that affect people with disabilities the most. Considering the importance of the HR function in the attraction and integration of persons with disabilities the following research questions emerge:

1. How can HR policies and practices support the employment of persons with disabilities?
2. What are the key HR challenges and barriers hindering or preventing the employment of persons with disabilities?
3. How can the HR function overcome these challenges and barriers and support the development of employment opportunities for persons with disabilities?

Aside from Ross’ (2004) study of disability discrimination from an ethical perspective, and the research on which this article is based, no published academic studies were found that explore HR issues as they affect employees with disabilities in Canada’s hotel industry. Research within the hotel sector focusing on disadvantaged groups includes mainly gender, age, and ethnic minorities related aspects (see, for example, KPMG, 1995; Mok, 2002). Projects that focus on disability issues mostly discuss the needs of guests and customers with disabilities.

This study aims to contribute to this under-researched area by exploring current HR practices and challenges that affect the attraction and integration of persons with disabilities in a wide range of hotel organisations in key urban tourism centres across Canada. The first part of this article provides background information and a theoretical framework of the concept of disability. This is followed by a discussion of the methodological approach of this study. In the main part the key findings are presented

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<sup>1</sup>The 2001/02 numbers are the most up to data sets of persons with disabilities available.

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