

Housekeeping. The **heart** of hotels

So you think housekeeping is a dead-end job? Well, think again. It puts you at the profit centre of the hotel and can be a fast route into senior management. **Ben Walker** reports.

Today, Vivien Sirotkin is at the top of the corporate ladder. As director of hotel operations at Q Hotels she is one of a relatively small number of UK female board directors (only 12% of UK company directorships are occupied by women and that percentage drops to just 6% in the hospitality sector, according to People 1st).

During a glittering career of high achievements she was the first woman to manage a five-star hotel in Europe (Gleneagles 1988-1991), the general manager of Cliveden (2001-2) and vice-president of Guinness Enterprise Holdings USA (1991-2).

The secret of her success? She insists that much of it is down to her housekeeping background: "A start in housekeeping is as good a start as you'll ever get in hotels. Cleaning rooms is hard work and if you can motivate and manage a housekeeping team, then you can probably motivate anyone." Vivien's view wouldn't be so surprising were it not for housekeeping's persistently lowly 'Cinderella' status within the industry.

While Vivien was finishing her degree in hotel and catering administration at Surrey University, an international hotel company made a recruitment visit. With blatant discrimination they said they were only looking for one male trainee ("I was very upset about that," she remembers) but added that there was a trainee opportunity in housekeeping.

Generic skills

"It was nothing I was interested in; I just saw it as a foot in the door," she says on accepting the position. "But I found that it enabled me to get a very solid number of good generic skills." Satisfyingly, Vivien's route into management was much faster than her male counterpart's. By the age of 23, she was a head housekeeper and by her early 30's rooms division manager.

"I overtook the guy who took the traditional F&B route. [Housekeeping] is a fast-track and you can't hide behind technical skills. I developed planning and organisation skills, people management and motivation, which have helped in all my roles since. It also gives you an eye for detail and makes you a perfectionist," she explains. No surprise then that Vivien thinks all hospitality graduates should do six months training in housekeeping and accommodation management.

"Being a woman and not taking the conventional route did not stop me getting where I wanted. I used my housekeeping positions to push into other areas," she adds.

Yet, despite compelling evidence of its benefits and the shining example of Vivien's own career, less than 1% of hospitality students choose to take the housekeeping route into management, according to research by Maritz and People 1st. ▶

Housekeepers make it happen for Hospitality Action

The housekeeping committee for this year's UKHA Annual Dinner Dance held in Manchester which raised £2,000 for Hospitality Action.

L-R: Liz Smith-Mills FIH, UK housekeeping specialist, Diversey/Vice Chair Yorkshire branch of IoH; Jan Flynn, regional housekeeping support manager, Central Facilities Group; Nan McDowall, executive housekeeper, QHotels, Crewe Hall Hotel; Donna Jarvis, executive housekeeper, Renaissance Manchester Hotel; Christene Hardman, housekeeping manager, The Place Apartment Hotel Manchester; Leigh-Anne Burns, executive housekeeper, QHotels, The Queens Hotel Leeds; Carys Jones, housekeeping manager, Arora Hotel Manchester.





“ A start in housekeeping is as good a start as you’ll ever get in hotels. ”

Vivien Sirotkin
Operations Director, Q Hotels

Vivien Sirotkin, pictured outside Crewe Hall, Cheshire, is the operations director of Q Hotels. She started her career in the housekeeping department.

Little recognition

“Housekeeping often gets very little recognition and this hasn’t changed much in the 30 years that I have been in the profession,” comments Liz Smith-Mills FIH, another distinguished hospitality professional who took the housekeeping fast-track into senior management. Today Liz is the UK hotel consultant at global cleaning firm Diversey and vice-chair of the Yorkshire branch of the Institute of Hospitality.

“General managers usually come through F&B and, I’m not saying all of them, but many think we just wave a magic wand and make everything clean because they don’t know the department. I always tell my staff they are the most important department in the hotel,” adds Jean Roberts MIH, executive housekeeper, Hotel du Vin Harrogate.

To overlook the importance of housekeeping is a huge mistake since the rooms department generates the most profit for a hotel and the cleanliness and condition of bedrooms are the most important factors in customer satisfaction ratings.

These facts have not gone unnoticed by budget and economy hotel brands – essentially bedroom-only products. It is encouraging that in this sector a few head housekeepers have successfully made the transition to general managers, and it is hoped that some of them will take the opportunity to migrate over to traditional full-service hotels.

Higher management

There are reasons why the majority of head housekeepers do not progress into higher management positions. On the negative side, in a department dominated by women (95%) many of them simply fail to recognise their generic skills and do not put themselves forward for promotion. Luckily there are programmes available to encourage talented women to progress into senior management roles. The Women 1st Step Up programme comprises six one-day training sessions, including:

- Planning and recognising your own strengths and weaknesses
- Communication skills
- Impact, presentation skills, dress and body language
- Networking and network building
- Assertiveness and confidence
- Influencing and negotiation

It also provides participants with a mentor. Last year Q Hotels put 22 employees through Step Up including some head housekeepers, and People 1st has secured a government subsidy to run the course again this year at a cost of £300 per candidate.

Some choose to remain in the housekeeping department because it can command attractive salaries. At the time of writing (July 2011) there were plenty of vacancies advertised by recruiters such as Caterer.com, including head housekeeper of a 130-bedroom hotel in the South West (£30,000 pa) and executive housekeeper at a five-star hotel in Canary Wharf, London (£40,000+ with benefits). The department can also provide scope to become a specialist or consultant and the perks plus opportunities for travel are

overlooked by students. Liz Smith-Mills FIH has forged a highly successful career by focusing solely on housekeeping and accommodation management.

Wake up call

“For someone who is deciding what they want to do with their hospitality degree, they may well think getting high marks for cleaning a toilet is nothing to be proud of. But what I found was that at the age of 22 I was a head housekeeper opening a hotel in Cambridge. The following year I was at the five-star Sandy Lane in Barbados. I can’t believe the places I’ve stayed and the ability to travel that a career in housekeeping has given me. Since then I’ve worked with Hyatt in Dubai and Shangri-La in Singapore,” she says.

Another distinguished professional who has travelled the world is Sheila Perera FIH, now manager of the Glenmor Owners Club at Gleneagles Hotel. In a career that includes 20 years as a housekeeping training manager, she has worked in Dublin, Jamaica, Johannesburg, Sri Lanka, New York and London.

Often there are not enough careers advisors who understand what housekeeping involves, says Liz. In addition to cleaning and making up rooms it includes responsibility for HR, budgeting, finance, maintenance and refurbishment.

In the summer of 2010 industry charity Springboard UK, with the support of the Institute of Hospitality, launched ‘Room to Change,’ a careers campaign to raise awareness of housekeeping’s value and importance. At three conferences in London, Edinburgh and Manchester, among the presenters, the Institute’s chief executive Philippe Rossiter FIH showed that the Institute can trace its roots back to the British Housekeepers Association which existed from 1933 to 1938, underlining housekeeping’s importance in the history of our professional body.

“I believe we created a very tangible ‘wake up call’ last year. Not only did these conferences serve to re-awaken awareness of this key activity within the industry, but they also provided an opportunity for those engaged in housekeeping, or accommodation management as I prefer to term the discipline, to, once again, see themselves as true professionals,” says Philippe Rossiter FIH.

Springboard UK’s Room to Change campaign continues this autumn with conferences in London on 12 September at The Guoman Tower; Manchester on 26 September at The Midland Hotel and Stirling Management Centre, Scotland on 13 October. It seeks to make senior management recognise the importance of housekeeping, invest in training and encourage new talent to enter the department.

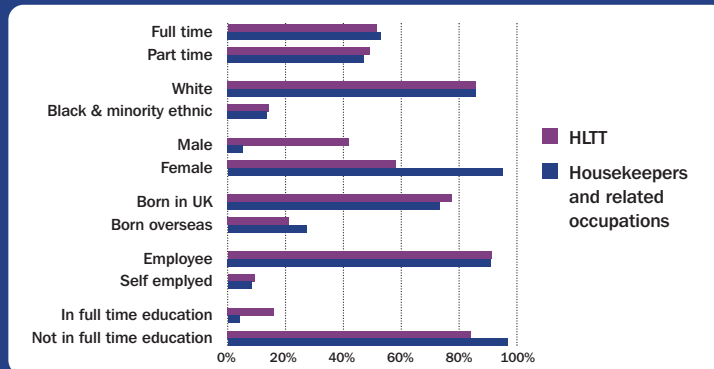
Variety

It is apparent that housekeeping has an ageing workforce and a high proportion of housekeepers are born overseas, as much as 85% in London. There has been a tendency over last 10 years to over-rely on labour supply from Eastern Europe of which significant numbers are now migrating away from the UK either to return home or to move to other EU destinations. Changes in visa regulations are having a real

UK Housekeeping: Some facts

Workforce characteristics

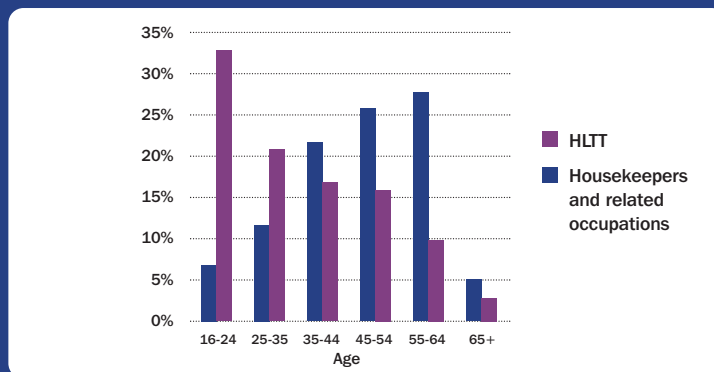
The vast majority of housekeepers in the UK are female (95%) compared with the 58% female workforce in the whole of the hospitality, leisure, travel and tourism sector. A high proportion of housekeepers are born overseas (27% compared to 21% for the sector as a whole). In London, 85% of housekeepers are born overseas.



Source: Labour Force Survey 2009/10

Age

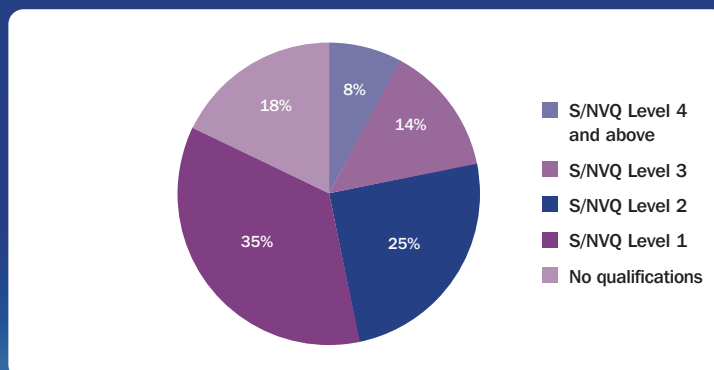
Housekeepers are comparatively older than the sector workforce as a whole. Just 7% of housekeepers in the UK are aged 16-24 compared with a third of workers in the sector as a whole (33%). Furthermore 59% of housekeepers in the UK are aged over 45 compared with 29% of the sector's workforce.



Source: Labour Force Survey 2009/10

Qualifications

The majority of housekeepers working in the UK either have no qualifications or are qualified to S/NVQ level 1 and entry level. Just 8% of housekeepers in the UK are qualified to S/NVQ level 4 and above, compared with 15% of the hospitality, leisure, travel and tourism workforce as a whole.



Source: Labour Force Survey 2009/10



Housekeepers can work in beautiful surroundings such as Glenmor at the Gleneagles Hotel.

Sheila Perera FIH is Glenmor manager at Gleneagles Hotel. Her earlier career as a housekeeping training manager took her to Jamaica, Sri Lanka, Johannesburg, Dublin and New York.

“ I consider housekeeping to be the heart of hotels and it is only when something goes wrong that it is recognised – just like our hearts. ”

Sheila Perera FIH
Glenmor Manager, Gleneagles Hotel

impact on the feasibility of employing people from non-EU countries. In addition, as previously cited, less than 1% of hospitality students are thinking of starting their careers in the housekeeping department. These facts all point to a severe recruitment crisis unless more is done to communicate the importance, breadth, variety and responsibility of the department.

At entry level, housekeeping has much to recommend it compared with working in shops or supermarkets, for example. You can find yourself working in beautiful surroundings, the hours can fit in with school times and are often more flexible than retail, and the work is physically demanding which some claim means there's no need to spend time and money on the gym!

“People don't realise the variety. Recently I've been on the Costa Concordia cruise ship where there are 3,000 passengers and 1,000 staff. It's a lovely environment to work in; Another lovely environment is Center Parcs where the room attendants travel around on bicycles to clean the lodges,” comments Liz Smith-Mills FIH. “There are also the perks such as the use of leisure facilities and you can manage your time to take advantage of holiday deals. When I talk to students they don't realise the variety and the benefits of housekeeping to enable them to travel the world.”

From Harrogate to Las Vegas

There are hotel companies that do a great deal for their housekeeping staff. One successful innovation comes from Hotel du Vin and Malmaison. Liz and Jean were both involved in the creation the 'Housekeeping Olympics,' a nationwide competition in which regional teams travel to different hotels to compete in three heats.

“They get to stay as a guest and see how the guest thinks; it's great for networking as they meet other housekeepers from across the country; and they demonstrate their skills and see what needs to be improved,” says Jean. The 'Housekeeping Olympics' proved so influential that it was showcased at the International Executive Housekeepers Association's conference in Las Vegas.

On the wall of Jean's office in the Hotel du Vin Harrogate, there are photographs of each of her team. Below each one she has made a note of their hobbies and interests. “In most jobs you probably don't know what your colleagues do outside of work but I am able to take an interest in them as people,” she says.

A number of staff incentives include monthly prizes of spa treatments, meals, and shopping vouchers, plus the chance to win a luxury trip to London. All head housekeepers from across the Hotel du Vin and Malmaison group meet twice a year. The last meeting included a trip to the Isle of Arran in Scotland to see where the hotel group's toiletries are produced.

The creation of a warm, family-like culture means that Jean does not have recruitment problems. Out of her team of 12 (a mix of English, Spanish, Polish and Thai nationalities) most have been in their jobs for more than five years.

Sheila Perera FIH at Glenmor is not encountering recruitment problems either: “This summer we've had a lot of part-timers and the last seven have been locals and that's great. It's down to how you sell the job. You are making a package for the guest, a beautifully presented package. It's a job that is greatly valued by guests and management and there's skill involved. I consider housekeeping to be the heart of hotels. It is the beating, hidden part of the business that touches everything, and it is only when something goes wrong that it is recognised – just like our hearts.” ■

▶ Sheila Perera FIH is speaking at the International Executive Housekeepers Association's Annual Convention which takes place in Las Vegas from 16-21 October 2011. For more information go to: www.ieha.org

Don't miss Springboard UK's Room to Change conferences this autumn!

12 September: Guoman Tower Hotel, London

26 September: Midland Hotel, Manchester

13 October: Stirling Mangement Centre, Scotland