

Inclusive Policies for Disabled Employees in Four and Five-Star Hotels

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Abstract

This study analyses policies geared at the inclusion of employees with disabilities in four- and five-star hotels with a focus on Johannesburg, South Africa. A qualitative research paradigm was adopted to achieve this aim, and interviews were conducted with a total of 27 managers working in the front of the office, maintenance and human resources. The key findings suggest that the four- and five-star hotels have no specified policies that are formulated for persons with disabilities. However, they have general policies that adapt to broader policy requirements set by the South African Employment Equity Act. Furthermore, the study revealed that only a few hotels complied with the benchmark target. This paper recommends that the hospitality industry formulate a more inclusive culture that invests in workshops that educate hospitality employees on persons with disabilities. The study has implications for hotel managers.

Keywords: Disability; inclusivity; hospitality management; compliance; legislation; South Africa

Introduction

The tourism sector in South Africa is one of the key industries that greatly impact the economy as it contributes approximately 9% to the Gross Domestic Product (Mordor Intelligence, 2020). The hospitality industry is a subdivision within the tourism sector that is responsible for 3% of job creation in 4-5-star hotels. The significance of this industry lies in its many benefits, such as offering a diverse experience to travellers and enhancing the employee's communication skills amongst others. However, the hospitality industry has its disadvantages as it has been defined as labour-intensive and highly cognizant of its brand, which it aims to uphold at all times. One way of upholding brand consciousness is that the industry has specific standards for the personality and appearance of employees (Uzunogullar & Brown, 2021). This criterion emphasises dress code, personal grooming and physical appearance of individuals in the hospitality industry as it is believed that employers are certain that good appearances positively impact customer service (Chiang & Saw, 2018). The importance of looks in the hospitality industry has been discussed as Aesthetic Labour (Chiang & Saw, 2018; Kawon & Baker, 2022; Tsaur & Tang, 2013). Aesthetic Labour comprises the qualities of employees within the hotel. It encompasses their appearance, how they carry themselves and how they communicate (Genc et al., 2020). Aesthetic labour is observed to have a positive effect on customer service, and it has become an inconvenience to employees, especially those who are part of the front office department (Tsaur & Tang, 2013). This is because it tends to focus on the "right people" for the industry (Uzunogullari & Brown, 2021). It is within the limitations of written and unwritten regulations that persons with disabilities are often overlooked due to the biases and stereotypes that people hold (Uzunogullari & Brown, 2021). For instance, in a 2014 report conducted by

Statistics South Africa (StatsSA), it was found that only 0,9% of persons with disabilities function actively in society (South Africa, 2016) meaning that only 0,9% of persons with disabilities have jobs. Furthermore, the South African Commission report in 2017 reported on the unfair discrimination that persons with disabilities experience in the workplace. In this report, it was indicated that only 1,2% of persons with disabilities were part of the labour market (du Plessis & Njau, 2019). Compared to the 2014 report above, the 2017 report revealed an increase in the disability prevalence rate which went from 7,5% to 7,7% (StatsSA, 2018). Despite the above statistical description, it is observed that there is inadequate data on the most recent statistics quantified through a household survey. Thus, the lack of participants in the survey does not provide a precise population presentation (South Africa, 2016).

While there have been studies conducted on the different aspects of the hospitality sector, the area that explores the provision provided for persons with disabilities has been largely neglected especially in the developing world such as South Africa. The key argument for this focus area lies in the fact that very little has been done in terms of research focus on inclusivity in four and five-star hotels, especially in South Africa. In this paper, we argue that more analyses of existing policies for disabled employees ought to be conducted. By way of arrangement, this paper starts with a literature review exploring the definition of disability followed by a discussion on hospitality as a key economic sector and a review of disability in the context of the hospitality industry, especially within the hotels. Later, the methodology that was employed for this study is described and justification for its selection is provided. This is followed by a discussion of the study findings, conclusions and finally recommendations.

Literature review

Tourism, hospitality and inclusion

Globally, the Tourism sector contributes 7.7 trillion US Dollars to the economy (Statista, 2023). With such a significant contribution to the economy, the sector brings about other issues of inclusivity and accessibility generally. The hospitality industry is elitist. This is exhibited by the industry having a criterion that emphasises the particular people they employ and the kind of guests they cater to. Such elitism brings about the emergence of more prominent themes, such as inclusion (Chiang & Saw, 2018). It is noticeable that persons with disabilities are excluded from participating in the tourism and hospitality sector, as observed through facilities not accommodating persons with disabilities. For instance, Lim (2020) mentions that holiday packages are created for persons without disabilities. Equally, Benjamin et al. (2020) assert that travel booklet catalogues only represent persons without disabilities, strengthening the exclusion of persons with disabilities. Guests with disabilities often face hindrances when they travel to a destination. Lim (2020) argues that guests with disabilities encounter physical barriers where the facilities cannot accommodate different kinds of disabilities. Also, they encounter behavioural barriers which are evident in the language used to refer to persons with disabilities, influencing how people interact with them. Such issues are not faced by non-disabled people when they travel. Furthermore, persons with disabilities are underrepresented in the hospitality and tourism industry based on the abovementioned barriers, perpetuating employment discrimination. This paper is positioned in the academic discourse on hospitality, tourism, accessibility, and inclusion. The following section defines disability.

Defining disability

The conceptualisation of disability stemmed from the models of disability, particularly the medical and social models of disability. These models offer contrasting perspectives on what is recognised as a disability (du Plessis & Saayman, 2010). The medical model of disability has given doctors and healthcare institutions authority to describe disability. The medical

model of disability delineates disability "as a constraint or the having restricted ability to act in a specific manner that is deemed normal to human beings" (Darcy & Buhalis, 2019:4). The model has been largely criticised for bringing about derogatory terms that are used to label and refer to persons with disabilities. Alternatively, the protagonist is the social model of disability, which gives power back to persons with disabilities as it advocates for social change. The social model of disability emerged due to the lack of representation and voice of persons with disabilities as they allowed non-disabled people to advocate for them and speak on their experiences. The social model defines disability as a "disadvantage or the restriction of activity caused by the social organisation which takes little account of people with physical impairments" (Terzi, 2004:143). The social model of disability strongly stresses that "disability is a result of the social environment, how it is organised, prominent bodies such as the government and not particularly the individual with the impairment" (Terzi, 2004:144). From these two prominent models, the conceptualisation of disability impacts how non-disabled people perceive disability. Definitions play a considerable role in understanding certain phenomena and shape the formulation of policies. Having provided a suitable definition of disability, the next section presents a contextual discussion of disability in South Africa.

Disability in South Africa

During the apartheid regime, the government of South Africa perceived disability through the negative lens of the medical model of disability (South Africa, 2016). Provisions and services provided to persons with disabilities were all implemented to mend and repair persons with disabilities. Any opportunities available for persons with disabilities were geared to restrict their advancement in their particular career path. Poverty is a concept that has been closely connected to disability. Graham (2020) affirms that persons with disabilities are given work opportunities in informal sectors which only offer them low wages. The author highlights that South Africa has exceptionally high rates of inequality where a range of policies have been enacted. However, those policies leave persons with disabilities in far worse dispositions than non-disabled people. The South African government enacted laws geared at societal transformation aimed at individuals previously disadvantaged by the apartheid regime (Nxumalo, 2019). The legislation was passed to prohibit discrimination and unfair treatment of persons with disabilities. These legislations include the Employment Equity Act (EEA) No.55 of 1998, the Promotion of Equality & Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act of 2000 (PEPUDA) and the Labour Relations Act 66 of 1995 (LRA). Other frameworks, such as the South African Human Rights Commission (SAHRC) toolkit for employers, are intended to support the incorporation of persons with disabilities into the workplace.

The EEA was ratified after apartheid as an inclusive policy that is designed to right the wrongs of past imbalances of disparities and seclusion, particularly for designated groups, namely, persons with disabilities, black people and women of colour (South Africa, 1998), (Mayer et al., 2019). The EEA requests that organisations meet their set targets to achieve equality (Mayer et al., 2019). The EEA's employment target is 2% for persons with disabilities to be included in the public sector (SAHRC,2017). The EEA compelled organisations to implement affirmative action, which is a process that recognises and removes employment barriers for designated groups (South Africa, 1998; Maclean, 2021). It is significant to note that the EEA is not a disability-specific legislation. It only emphasises equality and the protection of persons with disabilities (du Plessis & Njau, 2019). The most significant disadvantage of the EEA is the implementation and enforcement, which depicts the lack of commitment (Molamu, 2019). PEPUDA is another legislation that has been passed to prohibit prejudiced society (van de Bergh, 2019). The act openly states that no one may reject persons with disabilities any adjustments necessary to function in society (van der Berg, 2018; South



Africa, 2000). Moreover, Molamu (2019) argues that South Africa lacks commitment, resulting in the perpetuating of the marginalisation of persons with disabilities through the lack of implementation guidelines and enforcement.

Disability and hospitality in context

Hospitality is described as human interaction that is practised in the private, public, and commercial sectors where they serve people who are unaccustomed to that environment. The hospitality industry in South Africa has a growing number of tourists who visit the country (Mordor Intelligence, 2020). The employment of persons with disabilities is not as a seamless process as it is for non-disabled people. Singh et al. (2021) state that human resource personnel who work in the hospitality sector have uncertainties about employing persons with disabilities due to the belief that persons with disabilities are incapable of performing tasks that are assigned. Additionally, Persons with disabilities are seen as not suitable for employment due to their appearance. The hospitality industry criterion of the type of people they hire, with personality and appearance being the most significant benchmarks (Hui et al., 2020).

Research methodology

This study was conducted in Sandton. Sandton is a suburb which has been described as the leading business hub that hosts conferences and various business meetings. Johannesburg is the epicentre of financial growth for South Africa due to housing 65 of 100 major companies, consisting of banking institutions as well (Rogerson, 2014). In the 1990s, change happened where businesses were repositioning to northern areas of Johannesburg, such as Rosebank, Sandton City, and Midrand, where there was fast growth in the building of upmarket malls and hotels. In 2002, the Sandton Convention Centre was built (Rogerson, 2014). The Convention Centre is a multi-functional space used to host exhibitions and large meetings. It comes with innovative technology that is on par with international standards (TravelGround, n.d.). In 2010, the FIFA World Cup caused an outpour of new hotels, especially in this area. Sandton City is accessible as it is positioned along the route of the Gautrain, which directly links to the OR Tambo International Airport and office spaces. The existence of these offices has increased the demand for hotels, which is reflected in the developmental trends in this suburb. According to South African Hotels.com (n.d.), the Sandton city area has a total of 42 hotels varying from 1-star to 5-star. The below table provides a breakdown of the total hotels in Sandton.

Table 1: Overview of total hotels in Sandton

Sandton Suburbs	1-star hotel	2-star hotel	3-star hotel	4-star hotel	5-star hotel	Total
Sandton City	0	0	5	10	13	28
Bryanston	0	0	1	0	0	1
Fourways	0	0	2	3	2	7
Morningside	0	0	1	3	1	5
Rivonia	1	0	0	0	0	1
Total						42

Source: South African Hotels.com (n.d.)

There are several 5-star hotels in Sandton, specifically there to cater to international travellers who are there for business purposes. Furthermore, there are 4-star hotels which are not far behind in terms of the total numbers in the area, which offers travellers options in regards to price comparison. The Sandton area has one 1-star and 2-star hotels. Sandton City was selected as the case study region for the study. The area was selected based on two components. First, the area comprises several prominent organisations thus making it a business hub. It is packed with hotels that fit the criteria of four and five-star hotels.



In terms of the research approach the study adopted a qualitative research approach which allowed for in-depth comprehension of disability in hotels. In this regard, in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the selected stakeholders. The population of the study included hotel managerial personnel, namely; eight Human resources managers, eight Front office managers and eight Maintenance managers. Furthermore, the interviews included three disability activists who work in the industry. The key stakeholders were purposively selected based on their knowledge, experience, involvement in the hotel sector as well as their understanding of disability in hospitality in the context of South Africa. Twenty-seven interviews were conducted with these respondents and are reflected in table 2 below.

Table 2: Overview of total interviews conducted

Key informant	Number of Interviews
Human Resource Managers	8
Front Office Managers	8
Maintenance Managers	8
Disability Advocates	3
Total	27

The interview guides were created on the foundation of the research questions as well as the thematic gaps identified in the literature review. The research guide is structured thematically, where the introduction of the interview guide starts with warm-up questions such as "Could you provide a description of your job position" and "How long have you been working in the department". The inclusion of such questions was intended to build rapport with the interviewees and to alleviate any concerns that the participants might have also it helped with setting the tone for the interview. The specific themes explored during the interview included disability, inclusivity and the link between disability and hospitality with specific reference to policies and strategies for disabled employees.

The interviews were conducted online via MS Teams and Zoom. When the participants agreed to partake in the study, the researcher asked the participants about a suitable time to conduct the interview. Once that was established the researcher contacted the respondents through email with the link for the meeting along with the consent forms to be signed before the interview commenced. At the beginning of the interview, the researcher obtained verbal consent from the interviewees and described the purpose of the study as well as the confidentiality clause that they had and that the hotel they represent will remain unnamed.

The interviews lasted on average approximately 20-30 minutes and were recorded using the record option on the online platforms that were utilised. The recording was double-checked against the field notes, then the data was transcribed verbatim. A thematic analysis was conducted to develop the emerging themes from the transcripts with the help of the Atlas.ti software program. Codes and themes were developed and the software program assisted with sorting out the data by labelling and coding to provide differences as well as similarities in the data. The emerging themes will be discussed below.

Results and discussions

The below section discusses the themes identified from the data analysis of the interviews conducted and will be further discussed.

Table 3: Thematic associated with policies in four and five-star hotels

Themes	Subthemes
Existing hotel policies aimed at inclusion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inclusion policy • Disclosure • Reasonable accommodation
Current hotel practices and strategies toward inclusion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inclusive strategies

Inclusion policy

South Africa is a country that does not have national legislation that is curated for persons with disabilities. From that background persons with disabilities are already at a disadvantage as the government does not demonstrate commitment to them. The legislation that exists, merely mentions disability in short sections where disability is defined and a brief description of reasonable accommodation is provided. The current study found that the majority of the hotels do not have any policies that are curated for persons with disabilities. They have generalised policies that adapt to the EEA which solely addresses discrimination and acceptable behaviour in the workplace (Chauke, 2022). For example, a human resource manager mentioned:

Our company, we are very inclusive we do have policies and procedures on fair treatment, non-discrimination. When it comes to things like recruitment, we try to minimize that, the department managers do not discriminate against who they are getting in their departments. We have a streamline process, so let's say for instance that I would advertise a position. Then I will have to look at the applicants that have received and see what positions we have available, could we reasonable accommodate someone with a disability in a certain position. In contrast, a maintenance manager was quoted saying:

They might have but in reality, if they have not employ anybody then nothing much has been done because talk is quite cheap, I can say as much as I can say but if I am not actioning it then it is a different thing. I feel we haven't taken much effort in terms of inclusivity We have included all kinds of race and so forth but when it comes to people with special needs, I would say the hotel yes it does teach and stuff but in terms of actions I would say we haven't moved far in regard to that because if we had one I would say we have done something.

The generalisation of policies suggests that hotels view the inclusion of persons with disabilities as a ticking box exercise. Additionally, the hotels that do not have any policies in place are evidence that hotels do not consider it necessary to have a policy that focuses on the inclusion of persons with disabilities in the hotel. Such is concerning as the participants of the study advocate for equal opportunities for all, that belief is not reflected in their practices in the hotel.

The policy of disclosure

The main hindrance that persons with disabilities face when seeking and keeping a job in the hospitality industry is the issue of disclosure. Disclosure entails persons with disabilities divulging their disability and requesting for reasonable accommodation to allow for active participation in the workplace. According to Lindsay, Cagliostro and Carafa (2018), disclosure is a double-edged sword where disclosing a disability may improve the involvement of persons with disabilities in the workplace due to the employer making provisions of reasonable accommodation. Disclosing a disability during the recruitment process may result in discrimination and stigmatisation (Lindsay et al., 2018). Similarly, Bam and Ronnie (2020) assert that it is vital for persons with disabilities who are applying for a vacancy to have control and influence in the manner in which they disclose their impairment. The authors reveal that persons with disabilities often prefer to hold back information about their impairment due to past experiences of rejection and prejudice. To ascertain these findings, participants were asked does the hotel requires people with disabilities to disclose their disability, a human resource manager mentioned:

It is mandatory, you will know that of course with someone that has mental difficulties or mental issues, for example, it will all depend on them as an individual because their disability is something that you cannot see.

Alternatively, another human resource manager stated:

So, we do training, sensitization training where we encourage people to disclose their disabilities. So, to reasonably accommodate people with disabilities.

The findings from the study reveal the negative and positive effects of disclosure. The overall consensus is that hotels do not have a compulsory policy that compels persons with disabilities to disclose their disabilities they encourage persons with disabilities to disclose their disability when they are ready for reasonable accommodation purposes. The findings of this current study are similar to research conducted by Majoko (2018). The study was conducted in a university, and it explored the student's likelihood to disclose their disability during the admission and registration period. The study revealed that students who disclosed their disability during the registration stage found that they transitioned well into the university due to support and reasonable accommodation being provided. Comparably, students who did not disclose their disability were due to past experiences of stigma and prejudice.

Reasonable accommodation

Reasonable accommodation is defined as adequate modifications that are implemented in the workplace that do not cause undue hardship to the employer and are targeted at making the workplace suitable for persons with disabilities (United Nations, 2006). The South African Human Rights Commission guide states that it is the responsibility of the employer to provide reasonable accommodation for employees with disabilities (SAHRC, 2017). The study found that some of the hotels have adjusted their facilities to accommodate persons with disabilities. For example, a human resources manager said:

The lady that has 40-50% sight, she works in our rooms service department because there is no requirement for her to basically work a lot on the computer. So, she has one system that she works on, which is very basic and also the majority of her work is on the telephone.

Similarly, another human resources manager added:

The chef, for instance, that we had, he used to work in housekeeping but his real passion was actually in the kitchen. We did move him to the kitchen and then we assigned a buddy to him for obviously if there is like an evacuation or a fire drill. That buddy would always be responsible for this person. We did find that it was a risk in the kitchen for a deaf person because they work with warm/hot pots and things like that. He can't always hear if a chef is behind him is busy with something. We moved him out of the kitchen completely to the staff restaurant area where he did well and worked independently he used to prepare his own meals, but he didn't have as many risks.

However, the challenge revealed in the study was that there was a lack of willingness from some of the employees to reasonably accommodate persons with disabilities. To illustrate this, a front office manager was quoted saying “we accommodate, I cannot say people do it happily, so they do it because they have to”.

The above responses show that hotels try to reasonably accommodate persons with disabilities even though, in some instances, non-disabled people employees do not do it willingly. The current study does not support previous research conducted by Paez and Arendt (2014), which revealed that managers consider reasonable accommodate an expensive exercise. The contradiction sets in as the current study depicts that reasonable accommodation can be implemented without spending large amounts of money.

Inclusive practices and strategies

Inclusive practices and strategies are implemented to supplement the lack of policies in place to advocate for the inclusion of persons with disability in the hotel. Further, these practices and strategies create awareness on persons with disabilities. The study found that most of the practices that hotels have are related to reasonable accommodation and have no other practices outside of that. However, a few of the hotels did not only have reasonable accommodation as the bare minimum they also had education and training workshops conducted as a way of encouraging the inclusion of persons with disabilities. For example, a front office manager mentioned:

We just recently had a workshop awareness for the disability for the blind which was quite informative. It was actually the first time that we actually had training for somebody that actually came, brought their dog and basically spoke about it. We do have awareness when it comes to that around the entire hotel whether it is your posters on how we actually would have to treat either a blind person.

Equally, another front office manager from a different hotel indicated:

There is support in people from the culture team, who assist them, who also have program called SOLICE, that is a benefit that the hotel provides for people with disabilities So if people within the department had a disability, you could direct them into that direction of people who can speak to if there is an issue. SOLICE that is a companywide program that we use that is for all individuals mentally, physically if you are going through depression you can phone them. It is a 24-hour call line if you have any suicidal issues, any abuse issues. So, we have those programs, we have got our people with culture team, that is available at all times. We also have our ethics hotline so that is the hotel global initiative so you can phone that if you feel any abuse in terms of your ability to perform.

The majority of hotels do not have any practices outside of reasonable accommodation. This suggests that hotels do not go above and beyond to create awareness and educate staff about persons with disabilities.

Conclusion

The current study examined the inclusive policies that 4-5-star hotels have for disabled employees and their level of compliance with national legislation passed for inclusion in the workplace. Based on the findings of the study, it can be concluded that 4-5 star hotels have generalised policies that are adapted from various national legislatures such as the EEA and SAHRC. Further, the study found that reasonable accommodation, disclosure, accessibility and inclusive practices were part of the generalised policies which were in favour of persons with disabilities. The only concern arises from the inclusive practices where hotels can have more initiatives geared towards the education and training of non-disabled employees.

The present study offers significant theoretical contributions to the current literature. Additionally, it will aid in conducting a future study that investigates inclusion in hotels from the perspective of persons with disabilities. The practical implications of the study are that it will help policymakers in the hotel in drafting a policy that is inclusive and other practical implications of the study are that perhaps hotels will consider hiring and integrating persons with disabilities in the hotel. Given the discourse around inclusivity, the study's findings show non-compliance with the national legislation based on the lack of employment of persons with disabilities. Such a finding makes it apparent to managers that they are lagging. Further, managers in the hotel, mainly the human resources managers, should rethink the recruitment processes in the hotel to be more inclusive. Furthermore, the study's findings will help the managers review the message they are sending to guests as they may see the lack of representation of persons with disabilities, which will be a cause for concern for guests who are disabled. They may be reluctant to support that hotel due to lack of representation.

While this study brought insight into the policies that hotels have in place to include persons with disabilities in four- and five-star hotels, the study did have limitations. Inclusion and disability may be understood differently across other provinces. The case study area is Sandton which is situated in Gauteng. Alternatively, other destinations in other provinces with a saturation of hotels, such as Durban and Cape Town, could bring about different perceptions and hotel policies for inclusion. The limitation for one province restricts the ability to generalise the information that is obtained by the study.

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