

Special stay



BUDAPEST'S HOTEL PANDA EMBRACES DISABLED EMPLOYEES

While many people try to keep their personal lives and business separate, sometimes tragedy strikes a personal note and the two spheres merge. That's what happened to Béla Kocsy, whose close friend's battle with a terminal illness changed his perspective on those struggling with physical and mental handicaps.

BY DREW LEIFHEIT

"A friend of mine got brain cancer and so I began helping him at his shop, or giving him a lift to get home," he recalls, wanting to help but also realizing his friend's capabilities. Visits to social centers for the disabled helped form a concept in Kocsy's mind: "I could see that they were very smart, have skills, speak languages and I thought about how they could use them," he explains. "I saw that these people needed a job like you or I need air or something to eat, so I thought about how I could employ people with disabilities and figure out what kind of work would be good for them."

SAME SERVICE, OTHER STAFF

Kocsy's family had been in the hospitality business for a decade, but it was when they bought Budapest's Hotel Panda that Kocsy figured out he could marry his sentiment for helping the disabled with the hotel operation. Last fall they began a major renovation of the Panda, and today it's a pleasant, small four-star hotel in Budapest's District II, but with a big distinction. "We offer the same services as other small four-star hotels," explains Kocsy, "but we may be the first hotel in the world whose staff is 90% disabled."

Today, Hotel Panda's staff of 15 includes a mentally disabled waiter, deaf chambermaid (to whom he gives written instructions) and an IT professional who gets around in a wheelchair. Kocsy says that most disabled employees work about three days a week on six-to seven-hour shifts. Non-disabled staff take over in the evening.

The Panda receives state support, Kocsy explains, whereby payments are determined by an assessment of the individual's disability. Such subsidies can often cover an employee's entire wage, but that doesn't mean Kocsy receives free labor, because he is also required to make substantial investments in things like training for his employees, who are not automatically qualified to work at the Panda. "You need to train them to be fit for the job, offering them training and language lessons. We give them English lessons free of charge," reports Kocsy, who says his staff's people skills are incomparable. "The government support is good for business," he adds, "but this is an investment in 'human profit' and guests at our hotel can receive service they've never experienced before."

Work in the 'real world' can also provide challenges to Kocsy's handicapped employees, who previously may have only done mundane tasks in "social work centers" where not much thought may be given to things like productivity or quality. "They are



trained in how the real world works," he explains. "So they may have two days for a specific job and they have to accomplish it. I find that they do, because they care about the business, because they know that we are working at this together."

Kocsy has created some true believers in his staff. Before coming to work at the Panda as a receptionist, Beáta Bory, who is recovering from mental illness, was unable to work for seven years. "I never thought I'd be able to work again," she explains, "but when I was contacted by an agency that tries to place the disabled I thought 'why not?' I phoned them and had two interviews. I was offered a job here as a receptionist and I live only five minutes away." Today, Bory works four days a week, even on weekends, and says she's enjoying booking rooms, supervising some staff and communicating with guests. She admits that sometimes she needs help from the boss when guests have to pay by credit card, but Kocsy is happy to oblige.

LONG WAY TO GO

Kocsy is something of a pioneer in employing people with disabilities in Hungary. According to Hungary's National Federation of Disabled Persons' Associations (MEOSZ), the employment of those with "changed working abilities" is being promoted by the government. In addition to subsidies covering salaries, funding is also available for things like making workplaces accessible for the disabled or sign-language interpretation.

MEOSZ contends that Hungarian enterprises can also capitalize on the diversity in staff resulting from the employment of disabled people, which can result in a real competitive advantage

Employing disabled people can result in a real competitive advantage.

for businesses. But it seems the country has a long way to go because, other than the Panda, only a handful of companies appear to be taking this on, including CIB, Nexton, T-Mobile, and IBM. Official statistics confirm this: in Hungary (and Central Europe) only 10% of the disabled are employed, compared to 40-50% in Western Europe.

MEOSZ's Julia Bernáth believes that, according to the examples of multinationals operating in Hungary, employing people with disabilities can be integrated into companies' corporate social responsibility plans to the benefit of all involved. "The

reputation of a company is promoted not only through direct marketing, but also if it becomes widely known that the company employs people with changed working abilities," she explains.

Bernáth cites the Americans with Disabilities' Act (ADA) in the US, which came into force in 1993, as a good example. "This Act is a model to the European Disability Movement which has been struggling for many years to implement such a model here on our continent as well. Therefore, we would be grateful if US companies would set good examples to other companies, both in Hungary and in other European countries."

Meanwhile, as the Hotel Panda is fully equipped with wheelchair access to accommodate both its employees and guests, Kocsy believes it's a real competitive advantage. "There's a scarcity of resources on the market for disabled guests and we have more experience with this, specifically because of our staff – we know better what is necessary." In terms of marketing the Panda Hotel, Kocsy says he's not using his staff's uniqueness as a selling point. "We're not advertising this – sometimes it surprises guests. One guest who came for dental surgery was shocked, but most foreign guests find this perfectly understandable." ★