

Disserving the service industry

 By [Guy Stehlik](#)

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Twenty years ago, South Africa had three prominent hotel schools, training approximately 600 students per year, very good, renowned hotels schools that each churned out around 70 white kids (mostly males, as women were generally considered too 'soft' for the industry) from the middle to upper-class suburbs of South Africa.



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As the large hotel groups also focussed on training industry 'wannabees', I would estimate that collectively our industry trained and placed 180 hotel school graduates annually. The South African hospitality school industry developed a solid reputation as these graduates dispersed across the globe, taking up sought after positions in hotels, kitchens, and restaurants globally.

Since democracy's institution in 1994, hotel schools were correctly encouraged to enroll students from previously disadvantaged environments. Moreover, our tourism industry was primed for an influx of visitors. These disadvantaged kids, though, were somehow expected to swiftly 'get with the programme' even though most had never even sat in a restaurant, let alone slept in a hotel bed. They were expected, unfairly, to 'understand' hospitality. Even today, hoteliers are still lamenting the caliber of hotel school graduates, but what are we doing as leaders of our industry to ensure a generation of top quality, passionate hotel operators?

I was recently invited to a very prominent and famous high school career day, to be available and share knowledge and passion for my industry. I had not one taker, not one single interested student. What I did learn, however, was that the industry is tainted with perceptions – some true and some false: perceptions of being white-owned and white-managed; perceptions of being an incredibly tough and demanding career that requires long hours and sacrifices; perceptions that hotel schools are expensive and reserved for privileged wealthy families. What a travesty! We are trapped behind a crippling image problem.

Taking stock of our talent

Even though I don't generally point fingers, I must admit that the industry at large should take account. I don't think that any South African hotel group or independent hotelier can honestly say that we are doing our best to develop our disadvantaged people. Why are we not actively recruiting far more young people into the tourism sector? Where are the new generation hotel school students? Why are we suffering so many unspoken realities?

If we could wave a magic wand, we at BON Hotels would develop our own hotel school. This requires time and patience and a little bit of common sense, quite frankly. Inspire these children. Take the time to give them the experience of hotel service, a hotel room, a proverbial flight across the ocean. Teach them that this is a very exciting industry, one of endless adventure, travel, and learning, an industry offering broad horizons and global opportunities. Let them feel how rewarding it is to serve patrons and guests. Let them relish absolute satisfaction in the simple delight of happy faces.

It is time for us in the South African hospitality sector to take stock of our talent. Tourism is a huge industry for our country. We should be putting pressure on all parties, current hoteliers and government included, to dedicate time and energy, and to end this apathetic disservice to our most precious commodity – our youth.

The views expressed herein are solely those of the author

ABOUT GUY STEHLIK

Guy Stehlik is the CEO and founder of BON Hotels and Director of BON Hotels International West Africa. Having vast experience in all aspects of Hotel Management as well as having owned his own hotels, Guy created BON Hotels as an "owner-staff-community-guest" centric company to herald in and define an exciting new era in hotel management.

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