

With a passion...

INTERVIEW

Housekeeping Today UK meets Adele Oxberry FIH. Starting out as a chambermaid working with her mother, she has spent her entire career in hospitality and now focuses on work-based learning and apprenticeships – a subject she is incredibly passionate about. She runs Umbrella Training – a business that provides and promotes apprenticeships in the hospitality sector.

You became a hotel chambermaid at a very early age, was this by choice or necessity?

A bit of both but more by choice. My mother is a strong Irish lady who worked as the executive housekeeper at the Flemings Hotel in Mayfair. In order to buy the things I liked i.e. Nike and not value brands, she introduced me to weekend work whilst at school. I used to work every Saturday and Sunday, half terms and summer holidays cleaning 12 rooms a day on one section to four-star standard. I loved it! I used to love the independence of buying things for myself albeit I used to buy more for my brothers and family rather than myself and I certainly would not spend £25 on a pair of trainers (a lot of money then!).

Clearly you have filled a number of posts between your chambermaid days. And your current role as managing director of your own training company. Could you fill in the gaps?

Yes, I was a chambermaid until I left college where I studied City and Guilds 708/709 - housekeeping and reception. As I worked for my mother during study times, I also moved employment with her and before I left college I was working at the Holiday Inn Mayfair as an evening maid. By the age of 19 and once qualified, I was the housekeeper for the VIP floor at the Britannia Hotel in Mayfair (Grosvenor Square) working for another acquaintance of my mother (who again was Irish). By the age of 22, I was offered a position to work in reception at the Rathbone Hotel and then followed this avenue whilst also working for my mother on occasion as a room attendant – more so to help her out as she struggled to get maids all the time. Eventually I became the front of

house manager at the age of 25 at the East India Club and there I remained employed for just over eight years.

Tell us about your time as an assessor with a national training company.

I first learned about assessing whilst training for my D32 at the East India Club, I loved what it meant and that we could train our staff to a national standard as well as our own. I assessed all the front of house and housekeeping staff for our company until I found a job actually working for a training provider. I was interviewed and immediately offered a job. I used to assess housekeeping and reception NVQ's along with supervisory NVQ's.

Having the organisational skills I had learned from an early age, I felt confident and passionate doing this role and loved sharing my experience and knowledge of the sector with my candidates. After working in the apprenticeship arena in various roles for over 15 years I eventually became the London regional manager and initial shareholder/founder of a national training provider and witnessed the whole process of forming a provider, growing the team from just me to 68, holding the best performing region financially for over six years, and then to eventually leaving and having a vision to being an elite provider who did things differently – better to be simple about it.

What decided you to launch Umbrella Training?

By the time I reached 45 I knew work-based learning politics and processes back to front and heard about the new apprenticeship reforms (from April 2017). I knew I had to be a part of that new landscape. This is my passion - the sector and apprenticeships. I formed Umbrella with my husband who for years kept telling me to start on my own. I took the leap of faith and in Nov 2012 Umbrella was formed. I have not looked back and love our little company.

We have started as we mean to finish and are making a real difference to the sector, as our success rates are fantastic and we have apprentices with so many of the top end hotels as well as a few of the smaller ones. This speaks volumes to me as the MD. Our team are all industry experts with strong company values and we all carry the same goals to deliver meaningful apprenticeships. We are small and niche and our directors and team intend to keep us quality driven for our employers and apprentices.



Is housekeeping a major target market for your company?

Yes absolutely. We started a programme called TOPstars with four and five-star hotels in 2015, which had the right intentions of recruiting local people to work in housekeeping and to showcase this as a career for young people. That it is not just about cleaning rooms, it is all about organisation, dedication, excellent timekeeping, accuracy, attention to detail and that with these skills you can go to the top – in any profession.

We would really like to re-start this programme but in the meantime, we offer housekeeping apprenticeships to all our business partners and have 20 housekeeping apprentices currently on our books. For our catering apprenticeships we have culinary clubs that hold a raft of wider activity outside of the apprenticeship eg trips to Borough Market and 'Session with Chef' which are master classes with some of the sectors' finest. We are soon to launch our HK club to try and entice more entrants and employers to participate in apprenticeships. We see this as a way of really attracting some great talent.

Are apprenticeships aimed at new starts or established room attendants, or both?

Both, as long as new learning can be identified.

Describe an apprenticeship:

How and where does the training take place?

All training takes place in the workplace at agreed times and dates with the employer.

How long does it normally take to become qualified?

A minimum of one year.

Do apprentices receive certificates at the end of their training and are they recognised throughout the hospitality sector?

Yes, they receive certificates from an awarding body and also from the sector skills council stating they are qualified.

Can apprenticeship training be ongoing to achieve a higher level of job satisfaction?

We absolutely encourage this. An apprenticeship is designed for a novice person to become expert, and progression to higher levels is something we strongly advocate. 29 per cent of our apprentices progress to higher levels.

Please note the apprenticeship landscape is about to change where NVQ's will soon be replaced with Apprenticeship standards. We have been strongly involved in these reforms from supporting with writing them to educating employers on how they will benefit from these new apprenticeships.

The new standard for housekeeping is called Hospitality Team Member and apprentices can progress to level 3, 4 and even 5 (foundation degree level) through management apprenticeships - designed by employers for employers.

How do you create awareness of the services your company provides?

We have a great business relations director who knows the right people from the sector. I too have a strong foundation with named contacts from the sector and we gently advertise through networking. We attend a lot of hospitality events and are proud corporate sponsors of Springboard UK, which gives us a wider audience – not only in reaching out to under-represented groups of young people but also employers. We are really lucky that we are well liked as a training provider and our success rates are amongst the highest in the sector so word of mouth referrals happen a lot. We have an amazing website and most importantly we showcase our apprentices as they are the heart of our business.

Our apprentices really matter to our business and we want to showcase how amazing the sector is and how it can be for them. Employers are fed up with training companies calling them 'like PPI calls' we have been told, so we have to be really considerate when promoting Umbrella. We are also a part of the Big Hospitality Conversation with the BHA and promote careers in partnership with them. One of our apprentices spoke on the panel about how housekeeping has changed her life.

Who do you count among your housekeeping successes?

My mother. She introduced me to the world of work and I learned so many valuable lessons from her. My job as a chambermaid gave me so many lifelong skills that I use today in role.