



A Tall Order

Tourism is one of the largest contributors to the Jordanian economy, and has been identified as one of the main pillars of the country's future growth, but there are still some fundamental concerns that arise when it comes to the training of the industry's newest recruits. **By Wendy Emerson.**

"I TOLD MY FATHER I wanted to go to hospitality school, and he said to me, 'You want to be a waiter?'"

That conversation between Samer Khair and his father took place eighteen years ago. Khair's father and the (then) Minister of Tourism discussed the idea; the Minister ultimately convinced the family that hospitality held promise. Soon after the talk, Khair boarded a plane for Switzerland where he started a four year degree program.

Khair is thankful for that fateful conversation; today he is the Food and Beverage manager of a five star hotel, overseeing a staff of 220 employees.

In the ensuing two decades, though Jordan's economy has evolved dramatically, attitudes towards hospitality labor have not. Dean of Jordan Applied University's (JAU) College of Hospitality and Tourism Education, Dr. Muhsen

Makhamreh says, "There are 18 categories of jobs you can get in a hotel, but the impression is still that you can only become a waitress in a nightclub."

This negative sentiment is coupled with other detractors to the hospitality industry: societal values that honor paper degrees over hard skill sets, cultural stigmas regarding work, and competing countries with deeper pockets. Customers insist – at times – that expatriate labor is still better, and managers say that skills of people coming out of Jordan's various institutions still require lengthy and expensive training to get people basic levels of competency; everything from etiquette to knife handling skills to personal hygiene are taught by employers. "I have extremely high standards," said Executive Chef Rabah Abu Sbaitan at the Grand Hyatt hotel. "I need people with finesse, with creativity... I need

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to have people who are clean, who are nice, and who possess excellent communication skills."

USAID's Siyaha website reported last year that, "Tourism sectors will need an additional 29,000 new skilled staff," to meet the needs of the hotel and restaurant developments being constructed in

Jordan. Ostensibly, job creation would signal relief to a country that, according to CIA World Factbook figures, battles unemployment between 13.5% (official) to 30% (unofficial).

But to insiders, job creation means competition to already understaffed establishments. Rana Oran, Director of Human Resources at the Intercontinental Hotel in Amman said the hotel's restaurants and catering services are so busy that up to 2,500 people per day are fed at the various venues there, at times covering two weddings per day. Despite benefits, transportation, free meals, career management, international promotion opportunities and yearly raises, that hotel alone averages up to 70 open positions during the summer peak season; operators throughout the Kingdom echo the same complaint.

"The discipline is not known and attractive," Makhamreh said. "I blame the industry and the universities for not giving attention to this... there is a deficit Jordan does not fill." The total enrollment in the sector of hospitality is limited, the dean said, "At the university level during 2006-2007, there were 600 people enrolled in hospitality programs – total." Makhamreh attributes the paucity to a "lack of awareness campaigns," but added when people discover the training options available at JAU, that "People are surprised about what we do."

Insiders say they want to hire locals – to promote the country and to save on the high costs of housing, recruiting, and permits they spend on expatriates. Yet

still, talent isn't available at the speed or standard many require. Instead, establishments look to Lebanon, China, Vietnam, Italy, Japan, Philippines, France and Egypt to bolster their numbers.

One staffing manager of an Amman establishment told *Venture* on the condition of anonymity, "We advertise for positions, Jordanians just don't come. We held off on an expansion we had planned because we just can't hire enough people. For me, there is no unemployment in Jordan; people here just don't want to work."

Despite a host of challenges, efforts are being made to address the hospitality staffing need. JAU is making an immediate effort at relevance; "The first thing I did when I got the job two years

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ago was to change all courses to English instruction!" said Makhamreh. "Imagine! Graduating people with no English skills? This graduate has no use in the

market."

The school runs its own hotel and restaurant so that students get hands-on training before they graduate. Makhamreh said this is unique to the region; "Nobody has their own hotel." Additionally, the school offers exchange programs with American institutions so that students can improve on language and cultural awareness skills; students without strong English language skills are sent to intensive classes until they reach conversational proficiency.

Being good has a cost; Makhamreh said that big name establishments like the Burj Al Arab in Dubai sends three recruiters per year to JAU to source the best talent. While Makhamreh says that keeping local talent is important, they cannot get in the way of graduate opportunities abroad. Jordanian employers have a responsibility, he said; "The market has to attract them."

Even with yearly raises and benefits programs, however, local staffers say that keeping up with competition is getting tough. "Five star hotel employees are always targeted by recruiters (from other countries or industries)," said Hyatt Training Manager Rami Asad. "Even though it is a problem to us, I feel proud that people are attracted to our employees; it means we are doing a good job. They want extraordinary people, and that's what our people are."

Still, to job seekers, the industry "can give you full employment," Makhamreh said. "We need to transfer the hospitality that Jordanians are famous for in their



Jordan Applied University's students in training



Dr. Muhsen Makhamreh of Jordan Applied University

homes to the guests in the industry we work in.” While some worry that change will not happen at the pace of development, Makhamreh looks to success other disciplines have seen; “It happened with nursing... it changed with time.”

The Intercontinental works directly with vocational centers; “We help in designing the curriculum. They are open and cooperative and listen to our feedback,” said Oran. Centers in Madaba and Salt have even sent instructors to the hotel itself in order to identify the industry’s most chronic needs. “The VTC (Vocational Training Corporation) has put effort into sending teachers for training,” she said.

Despite growing numbers of training programs in the Kingdom, many complain in confidence that the skills of graduates are poor. Makhamreh says at JAU, the programs are both theoretical and pragmatic; everything from knife handling to management skills are taught. Students even have to be presentable for class; clean shaven in suits and ties. “Our number one priority is to improve the quality of education here.... for a poor country, the key to a good future is a good education.”

Ironically, hard financial times might relieve industry stigmas by getting some to look at hospitality for the first time. While applications for the fall semester at JAU have yet to arrive, Makhamreh said “I do expect to see an increase in applications.”

For students already enrolled in the JAU program, there is no convincing needed regarding the efficacy of a hospitality education; “100% of our students already work part time. They know they are employable,” the dean said.

Alpine Remedy

Chef Anton Würsch is agitated; there is a candy wrapper on the floor. He bends down, picks it up, and swiftly circulates the lobby, looking for a container. Not finding one, he proceeds upstairs to his (spotless) office to properly dispose of the item; he’s not the type of guy to leave an offense like that on the floor, and he’s certainly not going to call someone else to do it for him.

This is what makes Würsch, and his new position in Jordan, so interesting.



The Royal Academy for Culinary Arts

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Würsch, who is Swiss, is the Director of the new Royal Academy of Culinary Arts, a division of Les Roches International School of Hotel Management of Switzerland. He has been charged with a tall order: to institute a singular brand of culinary education in Jordan; one that will provide Swiss-trained labor to a fast-growing market. Würsch’s goal is to eventually see “Jordanians managing Jordanians,” in the nation’s restaurants.

“I hope we can be a model of craft-based learning,” Würsch said. “We are trained by doing. Having a Masters degree or a PhD does not help in this field; you cannot apply the skills,” said the director. “This country is geared toward educating its people, it’s a great thing,” Würsch said. “But what happens in Jordan is that people get degrees and are not employ-



Director Anton Würsch

able. In the sector we have nobody.”

The Academy’s remedy comes in the form of a new facility, tailor made for efficient Swiss instruction – with Swiss rules. “It’s by the book; this industry is all about discipline. Tardiness is defined the minute class starts. We demand a different level of conduct,” Würsch said.

“The saddest day of my life is if we expel a student from campus; if someone goes, that means I failed. But we go by the book,” he exclaimed. When asked about whether a ‘by the book’ approach will work in a wasta-laden climate, Würsch says yes.

“In Mexico, you have the manana (tomorrow) thing. In the Philippines its pare pare – everyone is my friend. In Jordan, it’s the culture of shame. I wouldn’t be in education if I didn’t believe change can happen. I don’t sit here to say its easy, but as an institution we believe we can have positive change.

We cannot break our standards. We operate in countries with equal challenges and have success.”

One problem Würsch does not want students worrying about for now is tuition. “Applicants can’t say I can’t afford it. If they have the passion, I say to them, let’s talk.”

The Chef has confidence in the program, “Because we know what students need to succeed.” Yet even amidst chronic shortages, Würsch advocates for long term solutions. “This educational institution is built for long-term benefit. Harvard didn’t become Harvard with short term solutions.”

Managers are happy to see help in

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the pipeline. “It is more cost effective to have students who have a grip on the level of business we do here. It is a fantastic addition to Jordan,” said Rabah. “They have been talking about the Swiss coming to Jordan for fifteen years,” said Khair. “Finally, it’s here, I’m so happy to hear it.”

“The aim is to produce quality middle management in two years,” Würsch said. While he admits that this should have been done 10 years ago, “It’s a drop of water on a very hot glowing stove,” within two years, the Academy will produce 30-60 graduates every four months.

A lot will ride on the students themselves, Würsch said. “Change will come from these graduates when they see what this is. It’s not about cooking. We are looking at changing the mindset of graduates. It takes courage to overcome perceptions. These kids must be the crusaders, the ambassadors.” Is Jordan ready? “We will find out,” Würsch said. “We were never blue-eyed about this.”

BRINGING IT BACK



Ammar Saad is a 23 year old student at JAU, who spent eight months working as a trainee at a Florida resort, as part of his 4 year BA Hotel Management degree. He worked as a front desk associate. He describes the experience to Wendy Emerson.

Before leaving, I was confused and scared; it wasn’t easy for me. My mother felt really badly about me leaving. But finally she said okay, since it was training for my future. The worst thing for me was the airplane! To be honest with you, I was dreaming about it beforehand; I had never flown before.

The experience was good in general. I appreciated the customer care; how they take care of people in America. They follow up on problems, have professional language and are always concerned about guests leaving happy. They do whatever it takes to make them happy.

In Jordan we are good at other things. For example, I think our F&B (food and beverage) is better. We make everything from scratch. There, they use a lot of mixes and just add water.

The best part for me was learning communication skills. The usage of language is different there; they stress the formal and correct language to use with guests. Here, I don’t always find the right words. I learned how to calm people down.

Once I had to use the skill; someone was upset about housekeeping and he kept shouting.

I did feel prepared by my Jordanian education at JAU. They sent me trainees to train! Even though my English is not perfect, I was responsible for training Americans. That made me feel good.

Jordanian managers tend to be bossy. There, my manager never told me to do anything without saying please. I really liked it. I was comfortable and willing to work extra hours because of the way I was treated. There, it’s about teamwork, not about hierarchy.

We need to train Jordanians how to speak the language of hospitality and understand why the right speech matters, how it makes a difference in customer care. I believe this is

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possible; hospitality is all about human contact. Even in a luxury hotel if you don’t check in someone nicely, it can be miserable, it makes people feel bad.

I want to apply to the Four Seasons when I graduate. They give you opportunities to advance; it doesn’t take as long to move up the ladder. They like to hire fresh blood.

My mom was really proud of me when I came back. She is almost sixty and was really jumping at the airport, I said, ‘Mom, take it easy.’