

Dawn Wynne

The chief people officer at Dalata Hotel Group shares her HR priorities and explains to *Jungmin Seo* how Dalata Academy's programmes help the people pipeline

What's your background in HR?

When I came out of university with an MA in languages, I did a Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development course. That was very much about personnel and management, and probably quite admin- and payroll-focused. Prior to that I had an operational background, so I worked as a regional operations manager and as a deputy general manager at various properties, including the Burlington hotel in Dublin.

Then, in 2008, I joined Dalata as HR manager in one of its hotels and worked my way up to our central office, where I was promoted to chief people officer.

How has the HR department changed over the years?

In terms of changes to what HR is broadly focused on, we now place a huge amount of emphasis on wellbeing and employee engagement. At Dalata, we do two full-on, whole company surveys a year and from there every hotel creates an action plan and submits it back to us, so we have a huge amount of listening and two-way feedback that goes on.

We are also prepared to work with people flexibly and I think that's a huge thing. Before, positions were a little bit more rigid and were pretty much full-time. People who wanted casual work would have worked in a bar, but now the way of working has completely changed due to hybrid models.

What are your priorities as chief people officer at Dalata Hotel Group?

We're such a people-focused business and, with 53 hotels, seven new openings and three live acquisitions over the past 18 months, we're in a really rapid period of growth. My focus

is very much on developing our people pipeline and making sure we've got a really strong succession plan into 2024 and 2025.

We also have a number of new hotels coming on board and we're always looking to grow, which is really exciting for our employees and prospective employees.

Do you tend to promote from within or recruit afresh?

We recruit through all channels, but our main focus is on developing an internal pipeline of people. In the past year we've had 695 internal promotions, so that's a huge amount of talent that we're generating from within the company. That's why we have 17 development programmes and we also have the Dalata Academy, which is our own school of hospitality and strategic leadership.

We put everybody through those courses so we have that pipeline. We're thinking about succession – about who is ready for that next assistant front office manager role or food and beverage role. When we hire anew, we see what's available in terms of talent. We're prepared to train people up from the very basics, from how to make a bed or carry a tray all the way up to management.

How does the Dalata Academy work?

We formalised the Dalata Academy in around 2015 or 2016, and at the time we brought in a general manager's development programme, so it was originally designed for people to become general managers in the future. Since then it has grown to 17 development programmes with content spanning entry-level roles, such as a food and beverage assistant or a waiter to programmes for heads of department, financial programmes, HR ►

“Our main focus is really developing an internal pipeline of people”

CV

2022-present Chief
People Officer, Dalata
Hotel Group

2008-2022 Head of
Human Resources,
Dalata Hotel Group

2005-2007 Deputy
Manager, the Burlington
Hotel (Jurys Doyle Hotel
Group)



The Caterer interview

“It’s not just about the skill level, it’s also about the confidence”

◀ programmes, sales programmes and revenue management programmes. They offer leadership and strategic management skills, especially for newly promoted supervisors.

The programmes are generally 12 to 18 months long and a number are accredited. For example, the revenue management programme is accredited by a university, so there is a qualification at the end. We also have something called the Elevate programme, which is an accredited programme for people who typically have not received a third level of education.

We also have Dalata Online, which has more than 170 e-learning courses. When Covid hit we opened it to every employee, ranging from waiter to general manager. We have courses such as fire safety and others such as delivering a good job chat, tips on how to interview, people management or even using Excel.

During Covid, more than 120,000 courses were taken and even in 2022, people took 113,000 courses, so you can see the level of engagement. We also have external courses, such as project management.

How do you retain staff?

It’s about creating an employer brand that is people-first. It’s making sure people know who we are and that’s probably one of our challenges in the UK, because we’re relatively new to the market.

There’s always going to be people who are going to transition through the hotels, such as students who join us for a certain period of time and don’t want to necessarily stay within hospitality, but there are also people looking for a good career in our industry, and it’s about continually giving them the excitement and making sure their personal and career growth is supported at every single opportunity. We have to ensure our managers are well-trained in people management so they can support that journey, because it’s not just about the skill level, it’s also about confidence.

What other measures have you introduced to take care of your staff?

We’ve put a huge investment in the past 18 months into our staff facilities and our staff meals, because when we were looking at what challenges people are facing, we know we can assist with the cost of living. We haven’t got staff houses, but in Ireland we had to look



Clayton Hotel Glasgow

to India and Bangladesh for a number of our chefs and we sponsored their visas and brought them over. For a period of time we gave them housing within our hotels so they could get to know the area and where to rent, so although accommodation is not something we offer as a standard, it’s certainly something we can help with.

You mentioned hiring from overseas. Have you been affected by the rise in skilled worker visa fees?

The increase in fees is another layer, another challenge and another cost. In the beginning, we found hiring from skilled worker visas wasn’t the easiest process to navigate and we engaged a solicitor to help us. We’ve since brought on 19 or 20 people through the skilled worker process. The main challenge is it’s not for every role. We need entry-level people but they don’t qualify for the visas, so that’s probably where we’ve found it more difficult.

Where are staff shortages most acute?

In the UK, we hire a lot of our housekeepers through a partnership with an agency, but chefs are difficult to source and obviously very skilled. There are lots of really great chefs all around the world, but we can’t always use visas for every position.

Have you noticed different demographics entering the workplace due to the staff shortages?

We haven’t seen a huge shift from the older generation, but we also did a bit of a cam-



Clayton Hotel Bristol City



Maldron Hotel Manchester City Centre

paigned about 18 months ago where we targeted parents coming back into the workplace. When we talk about inclusion and diversity it's really about spelling it out and saying we're really flexible, because at Dalata we can train people into their roles if they want to come back into the business.

How do you engage with young people?

We have a graduate programme that is part of the Dalata Academy. We take on more than 50 graduates a year and they are not necessarily hospitality graduates – they could be graduates of any sort of business degree, be that operational, sales, revenue, finance or HR.

Having separate career streams for HR and sales is hugely attractive to those graduates, so we work really closely with a number of universities to promote that. We currently have 73 graduate managers on a structured graduate programme as part of the Dalata Acad-

emy. In 2023, we had a 94% retention rate, and in 2022, it was 65%. Ninety per cent of the HR graduate team who have completed the course are in full-time, permanent roles with Dalata.

When we open new hotels, a lot of our graduates helped and a lot of them then went on to take up employment too. In fact, 77% of our management teams are internally appointed in our new hotels, so it's a huge number and our graduates play a huge part in that as well.

How does Dalata give back to the community?

We've introduced an Adopt a School programme through the Dalata Academy. We link with a school and talk about the industry and sell hospitality as a great career choice. We've also partnered with a number of charitable organisations and we've offered some training for Down's syndrome groups. In Ireland, we trained up a group of people with Down's syndrome in hospitality and, at the end of the course, three or four of them took on roles in our hotels, so they were employed as a result.

Would you consider introducing this scheme to some of your UK properties?

Absolutely, 100%. After we ran the scheme in Ireland, we had an HR forum where we brought the HR managers from the group together and we explained exactly how we had run the Down's syndrome partnership. As a result, a number of the hotels in the UK have said they've since reached out to local Down's syndrome partnerships to replicate that.

What steps can the industry take to hire people with all kinds of disabilities?

People tend to be a little nervous about learning through our development programme. If people have a learning disability we make sure we adapt to it, so we will send course content ahead or we will make sure that whatever accommodation they need, they have it.

Dalata Online will also have an upgrade in the next couple of months and we'll be introducing a huge feature on accessibility where, for example, the text can change to green on a black background. I think it's about making sure there are no barriers to people doing their jobs, because we want to ensure there's no barriers to them getting the next promotion. If that means adapting one of our programmes and our learning, then that's what we'll do.

Is artificial intelligence impacting operations and the training of staff at your hotels?

It's not really from an AI perspective, but we have introduced cordless vacuum cleaners. They have been really helpful and I think it's transformed some of our housekeeping departments, as they are not straining their backs as much.

At some of our properties, people can check in on their phone or from a pod in the lobby to help take some of the pressure off the reception desk, as there's nothing worse than having a big queue when you are on front of house duty! But we are looking at technology all the time, whether that's from a learning perspective, languages or accessibility, to make things easier for people.

About Dalata

Dalata Hotel Group was founded in August 2007 and is Ireland's largest hotel operator, with a growing presence in the UK and continental Europe. The group's portfolio comprises 53 three- and four-star hotels with 11,412 rooms and a pipeline of more than 1,300 rooms. It has 31 owned hotels, 19 leased hotels and three management contracts, with brands including the Clayton and Maldron hotels.