



INCOME Tourism

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Interview

Interview with Michelle Seguna, HR Director Westin Dragonara Resort, Malta



Michelle holds the position of Director of Human Resources at The Westin Dragonara Resort. As a member of the Senior Leadership Team of the company, she is involved in strategic decision-making, budgeting, operational excellence and project management. Through proven expertise in talent management, organisational development, employee engagement and performance management, she has led The Westin Dragonara Resort towards achieving numerous prestigious HR Awards. Michelle is also a public speaking coach and trainer, founder of Speak to Move. She enables professionals to build their own confidence with public speaking, articulate their message clearly and deliver high-impact talks in order to lead successfully.

The Westin Dragonara Resort – project associate partner

The Westin Dragonara Resort located in Malta is one of the 28 associate partners of the INCOME Tourism project. It is a leading 5-star resort, managed by Marriott International. The resort offers 340 accommodation options, featuring a suites collection including 29 luxury baysuites. Guests can enjoy direct easy access to the sea through 2 private beach lidos. The resort offers its guests 5 dining outlets to choose from, all of which include a healthy range of Eat Well options. It offers various facilities including 2 outdoor and 1 indoor pool, the Westin Workout Fitness Studio and the Westin Family Kids Club.

THE WESTIN
DRAGONARA
RESORT
MALTA



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The company employs around 400 associates comprised of a diverse workforce where different nationalities, backgrounds and cultures mix and merge to combine a fascinating workplace where individuals can work together and grow together. Wellbeing lies at the heart of work life and resonates with the Westin Brand's Wellness promise. Westin promotes a work environment that fosters a sense of belonging and which creates unity amongst the workforce. The company enjoys an accolade of awards including the most recent awards, Aon Hewitt Best Employer™ 2018 certificate and TripAdvisor's Travelers' Choice Award 2018.

Fundamental skills

When asked how Michelle got involved in the **INCOME Tourism project** as an associate partner, she told that she was approached by Joe Tanti of the Malta Business Bureau, which is one of the project partners, "Probably because he knows that I am a strong advocate on the need of investment in soft skills. I firmly believe that having a solid acumen in personal competencies, especially in the area of communication, enables individuals to be more successful in their careers and personal lives too. In hospitality, communication skills take on increased importance. In our business, we get the opportunity to interact with people coming from a variety of backgrounds, nationalities and characters too. Emotional Intelligence is key. Moreover, the further the progress up the career ladder, the more important these skills become. By the way, I am of the opinion that 'soft' is a misleading term, as if soft skills are less important than hard skills. I would prefer to call them fundamental skills".

Skills gap

As a Director of Human Resources, Michelle is very much aware of the importance of soft skills, but she also regularly experiences a skills gap with graduates that apply for a job. According to her experience, there are also differences in soft skills between students from various European countries compared to students from Malta. As for the Maltese students she finds that they usually have a very friendly and hospitable attitude, but appear to have less self-confidence when compared to students from Scandinavia, who in general have better presentation skills. "Of course the friendly and service oriented attitude is extremely important in this business, but knowing how to present yourself, having self-confidence, being able to communicate clearly your ideas to others, is crucial when you talk about leadership and taking your career to a higher level", Michelle explained. To her it would seem very useful when these skills could also be incorporated in the academic program. "Nowadays most students know to present themselves very well in the digital world via social media, but in the real world it is fundamental to be able to communicate and engage with other persons!", Michelle said.

Role of associate partner

When asked about her role as an associate partner in the INCOME Tourism project, Michelle mentioned that one of her tasks is to share her knowledge and experiences from the business with the educational institutes. "Businesses can help identify the skills needs and institutes can use this information to incorporate the teaching of these skills in their curriculum. In the end this is not only useful for the educational institutes and students, but it is also beneficial to the businesses. While Westin would continue to have their training programs for employees on soft

skills such as problem solving, creativity, leadership, and communication, this could then be less based on situations that have occurred or were noticed and need attention, and could put more emphasis on skills for personal development.” Michelle will not only be sharing her knowledge from the business, but will also mentor two students during this project. To Michelle it is obvious that the best way to learn soft skills is to practice these in a company. “Graduates that not only possess hard skills, but score well on soft skills are of great value to the labour market.”

Creating experiences

Michelle emphasized that especially in the tourism and hospitality business good soft skills, such as being able to engage with people, are very important as they help create an experience for guests. “Guests often forget about the places they were, but remember the people that made their stay a special experience”, according to Michelle. When there is a lack of soft skills, this often means a missed opportunity in terms of creating wonderful experiences. She illustrates this by telling about a negative experience she recently had when she went buying an ice cream with her nine year old daughter. To her daughter this was a happy occasion and she was excitedly chattering whether she would choose chocolate or another taste. However, this happy experience was not supported when she ordered the ice cream. The lady from the cafeteria looked very gloomy and sad and did not smile. She just replied “That one?” while pointing at the chocolate and did not engage with the excitement of the nine year old at all. “A clear example of a lack of soft skills, but it can also be the other way around”, Michelle remarked. “When I entered a shop to look for a new handbag, the salesman started asking questions about my work and for what situation I would need this handbag. He managed to ask these questions in a very engaging and non-pushing way, and in the end he even found me a matching scarf. He really was doing such a great job in giving me a positive experience that, even though he was working in a different sector, I did not hesitate to offer him a job at Westin!”

This last example of Michelle perfectly illustrates the value of soft skills in the labour market and hence the importance of the incorporation of a standardized soft skills curriculum, of which both students and businesses will benefit!