

8. Learning to be Professional: The Story of my Placement Year School of Management Hospitality intern at a hotel in New Zealand

I clearly remember the moment when I realised the significance of what I had undertaken; the feelings of sheer panic, stress and excitement. What had I let myself in for? I was finally, after several months of preparations, sitting in seat 3C on board a flight heading from London to New Zealand. I admit that I had to reach for some tissues as I tried to hide the fact I was crying from a very important looking businessman sitting next to me.

I hadn't planned on doing a placement year abroad. I thought it would be too expensive and difficult to organise even though for my course, International Hospitality Management, there were lots of overseas placements available. I even had doubts about doing a placement year at all. I mean why do one, once you graduate surely you can earn far more than you do when on a placement year? However, as the placement lectures continued I realised the value of the placement year for your C.V and the large number of students who are offered jobs at the end of them.

Using the U-learn application really helped me in my search for a placement. The only problem was there was too much to choose from. Did I want to do a hospitality based placement, or events management or even marketing? Did I want to be based in London, Manchester or abroad? Then the doubts over my abilities crept in. Would I be able to do this placement? Was I clever enough?

One afternoon, during my lecture it was announced that a French hotel company were coming to the University to recruit placement students. What particularly caught my attention was the fact that they were recruiting for their Australian and New Zealand hotels and the fact that they would help with the visas and costs. This was too good an opportunity to miss!

A few weeks later I went for the interview. I was a wreck of nerves. I had been up all night doing research on the company. I could reel off their vital statistics like a professional, I was ready for any question. I was all dressed up in a suit, pad and pen ready. Ten minutes after the interview started, it was all over. I couldn't believe how easy it was. I had been offered a placement in New Zealand at their flagship hotel for the region. I had decided on doing an events placement and I was assured that the hotel offered this opportunity.

The next three months was a whirlwind of university activities, applying for visas and organising my flights. It wasn't until I had that moment on the plane when I stopped to think about the fact I had never been to New Zealand before, I didn't know any one there and it was a jolly long way home if something went wrong!

I arrived early in the morning to be greeted by no one from the hotel and a very grey rain filled sky. The taxi supposedly organised by the hotel hadn't arrived and so after an hour of waiting around the arrivals area I managed to find a taxi and ask to be taken there. This was not quite the arrival I had been expecting. As I drove through the city in the back of the taxi I started to worry about where I was and the hotel I was going to be working for.

My first week in New Zealand was hectic. I spent it looking for somewhere to rent, sightseeing around the city and getting over my jet lag. It was a very solitary week as I still didn't know anyone and staff I did meet were very friendly but not forthcoming with invitations of friendship.

The hotel was very impressive, much grander than I had realised. There was a large restaurant and a separate bar serving bar meals. There was also a conference and banqueting centre, mainly used for corporate events. I had meetings with the HR department and the manager of the Food and Beverage department. Everyone was very encouraging and seemed pleased to have me there. I was the first placement student they had ever had from the UK.

On my first proper day I was given an induction tour and informed of what I was expected to do. I was also given a training manual. I was to work in the restaurant as a waitress doing a mixture of breakfast and dinner shifts. I was aware that I would have to work in the restaurant as part of my placement but had been reassured by the gentleman who interviewed me back in the UK that I would get to work in the conference and banquets department after the first month.

The first week went by very quickly. I was exhausted from the unsocial hospitality hours and still recovering from jet lag. However I was beginning to get to know my colleagues and that weekend I was invited out with everyone else. I quickly made friends with everyone. They were all around my age and working in hospitality I found that we spent a lot of time together and so becoming friends was easy to do.

Although the social side of my placement was going from strength to strength, the professional side was becoming a strain. After a month of just waitressing and not having been given any kind of official training plan I was becoming very frustrated. I asked for a meeting with my manager to discuss this and to talk about what it was I was looking to learn from my placement.

What happened at the meeting greatly shocked me. Instead of discussing a training plan I was instead informed by my manager that I needed to improve on the level of professionalism I was giving at work. I knew I had been late by a few minutes a couple of times and that perhaps I did try to get out of doing the more boring jobs, but I hadn't realised that any one else had noticed. I hadn't realised how de-motivated I had become and how that reflected on the quality of my work.

After a very uncomfortable talk with my managers we managed to work out a plan. I had to fight through the emotion I was feeling to explain how I felt about the placement training and that it wasn't what I had been promised by the gentlemen who had interviewed me. I promised to work better and to be more dedicated and they organised a training plan that was more suited to what I had been looking for. A review date for three months time was set to go over my progress.

Over the next three months I worked hard to improve myself. I was moved to the conference and banqueting department, an area that I had wanted to be in. This was the best department I worked in while on placement and I rediscovered my motivation and the enjoyment I got out of working in hospitality. There were times after a 16-hour shift when I felt like I couldn't go on but with the encouragement of my colleagues and the great friends I had made I carried on. I found myself taking control of situations and organising the team I worked in. I also took the opportunity to volunteer to work on certain events and to do tasks no one else wanted to do so I could get the experience.

After three months I had the review meeting with my managers. I knew that I had changed. I now took ownership for my work and looked to develop better ways of working for the team. I was more organised and careful and had developed higher work standards. My managers also agreed. They congratulated me on my efforts and I was offered the chance to manage a new café opening in the city centre for six weeks. It was a fantastic opportunity, but one I had worked

hard for. It was also an opportunity that would test my professionalism, as I would be managing two other members of staff as well as dealing with the day to day running of a café.

Running the café was a real learning curve. I had to deal with problems ranging from burst water pipes to a member of my staff having to be taken to hospital by ambulance. I was the first person to show up in the morning and the last to go home at night. I had to do all the ordering for the food and beverage supplies and count the tills at the end of the day. Everything I had learned at university was put into practice, motivation theories, financial management and food hygiene practices as well as everything else. Putting into practice what I had learnt was a great experience and showed that I had been listening in all those lectures. Before I started my placement there was no way that I would have been able to take on the responsibility or the commitment. After the six weeks I returned to the hotel and from then on was given more responsibility and rewarded with the respect of my managers.

By becoming more organised at work, I also found that my personal life became more organised too. Instead of keeping friends waiting for me I started to arrive on time, I even started writing lists to help organise myself. I saved enough money to go travelling around New Zealand for three weeks with some friends. The memories from that trip will stay with me forever; it really is the most beautiful country in the world. I took advantage of living in New Zealand as much as possible. During my year there I went skiing in Queenstown, skydiving at Lake Wanaka, tubing through the glowworm caves of Waitomo, surfing in the Corromandel and sailing around Abel Tasman National Park. I made some amazing friends who I still see regularly and who mean that my phone bill is huge.

The day I left New Zealand at the end of my placement I had a leaving party at work. My managers all came to say good bye and to wish me good luck in the future. It made me realise how much I had learnt. I had gone from being the new girl and not knowing anything to being able to manage and train others. When I got on the flight back to England I admit that I cried most of the way home. Not because I was homesick and worried like I had been before, but because it was the end of the best year of my life.