



## Playing with Fire: How a Hot Griddle Led to a Life in HR

You're probably familiar with the popular saying: *'Choose a job you love, and you'll never have to work a day in your life.'*

I can definitely relate to that.

Yet how many people do you know that are working in a profession they've always dreamed of?

I ask because there are lots of people out there who fell into what they're doing purely by chance and now just stick with it. They don't particularly enjoy it and they certainly wouldn't choose to do it again.

It gets better, though, because the other saying we often hear in business and HR circles is: *'People are your greatest asset.'*

It's a great sentiment but what if those people then happen to fall into the category above? Or they're not particularly nice or... good.

So, let's refine it to: **Good people are your greatest asset.**

Now that puts a whole new perspective on things.

Because *good* people inspire and do the right things. They work hard and get results. They create great cultures and build successful businesses.

And that applies just as much to the people at the top as to those on the ground. Because if you can help people buy into what you're trying to achieve and how they each play their part, you're onto a winner.

Look after your people and they'll look after you.

I'd like to tell you why that should never change and how I ended up spending my entire working life doing a career I love: HR.

### **How the hospitality industry led to a life in HR**

Have you ever had your fingers burnt? Whether literally or metaphorically, it hurts.

What about your entire hand? Believe me, that hurts even more.

That's what happened to a 14-year old me, excited at having my first paid job as a waitress. So, imagine my excitement when I was asked to work in the restaurant's kitchen – *a proper kitchen!* – and something I'd always dreamed of doing ever since I practised making pies out of mud and Daz washing powder as a toddler!

The only problem was that the chef was nowhere near as keen as I was. In fact, he didn't want me anywhere near his kitchen. And, just in case I was in any doubt about that, he made sure I got the message by deliberately slamming my hand onto the hot griddle later in the shift.

### **Avid enthusiasm extinguished by a hot griddle...**

The pain was excruciating.

Stunned and hurt, I wanted to tell someone, but no one wanted to listen. Even my dad was at a loss at what to do and responded with a simple: *“I just don’t know what to say Karen.”*

Knowing that it was wrong, I eventually plucked up the courage to call the owner. But guess what? He wasn’t interested and cared even less.

I was gutted. Even at such a young age, I knew that wasn’t the way to treat people.

And that taught me one of my first and most important life lessons: treat people badly and they won’t hang around.

So, I left.

### **If, at first, you don’t succeed...**

And then, with youthful optimism and believing that my previous experience was a one-off, I tried again, this time in a different hospitality setting.

I got a part-time hotel job as a Room Service Waitress only to find that some (male) guests would open the door to me naked or call out to bring the tray into the bathroom whilst they were in the shower!

I didn’t know how to react or where to look – and would bolt out of the room as quickly as I could. When I asked the owner (who was female) whether that was normal, she told me I was being naive. I’ll always remember her laughing at me as she called me a ‘silly girl’.

It was true that I had no worldly experience at that age, but I was still pretty sure that her response should have been more than a humorous, indifferent shrug.

### **...Try, try again**

By this time, I was now 15 and, still intent on working within the industry, I went to catering college and got a placement in an exclusive fish restaurant. Except the chef there had a completely different approach to how he treated his staff: his favourite trick was to put live crayfish down my chef's jacket and chase me around the carpark with live, untied lobsters and crabs.

It might seem like horseplay, but it wasn't; this guy took pleasure out of seeing people frightened.

And yet, all I wanted to do was work hard and do a great job. I just couldn't work out why people would be like that.

### **Going up in the world: bad conditions, bad managers and bullies**

My college course led to work experience in a hospital's catering service, a completely under-stimulating experience and one which instantly made me realise that my future lay in the private sector. Despite my experiences to date, it gave me much more of a buzz.

Then, at 17, a college milk round led to me being taken on by a large hotel company as a Trainee Manager.

Excited at the opportunity, I couldn't wait for my postings to different hotels within the group... including staff accommodation that ranged from damp and mouldy to those with no locks on the doors and no safety lighting for the dark and secluded walk back to the staff's quarters every night; together with managers that ranged from sarcastic, power-crazy and bullying to uninterested and dismissive with an unhealthy dose of 'not my problem' attitudes.

It was difficult to believe that trainees and staff in general were valued. Certainly, I had seen no evidence of respect, care or consideration towards them.

It just didn't make sense, and neither was I being idealistic. I was in a people-oriented industry and yet the people driving the culture were one of its biggest problems!

### **A lifeline... and then the lightbulb moment**

And then it happened.

Someone must have been able to read my thoughts because, out of the blue, the Training Director offered me a secondment in Personnel and Training (as it was known back then). And even though I returned to front-line hotel duties at the end of it and experienced more of the same as before (including one manager who ordered me to work in a cellar for hours and fabricate company reports “*or else*”), it gave me the impetus I needed.

Convinced that a major part of treating people right was to train them right in the first place, I landed a position in the Hospitality Training Company team as a Trainer.

The difference was staggering. Finally, I was surrounded by positive people with managers who appreciated the hard work that was being done and thanked you for it. As a result, motivation levels were sky-high and I saw people do whatever they were asked because they felt such a strong sense of loyalty.

That’s the key, I thought.

### **A turning point...**

And it was that that sold me.

Soon afterwards, I became a full-time student to do my CIPD (Chartered Institute Personnel & Development) and was relieved to learn that much of what I’d seen and experienced confirmed that that really wasn’t the right way to do things!

On graduating at 21, I got my first job in HR, as a Personnel Officer for a brewery with 200 Pubs. It was there that I cut my teeth learning the ground-level work in Personnel and Training and was able to start putting all the theory into practice.

## **A life in HR...**

The rest is history.

I built my career in the hospitality sector and over the next 30 years, rose up the ranks from a junior officer to HR Director in large corporates and smaller private equity companies.

I pretty much saw it all: being moved between companies due to mergers and acquisitions, overseeing disposals of parts of the group, and acquiring and merging new companies into my employer's company.

Having experienced all that first-hand means I know what it feels like to be acquired, sold and merged, as well as what it's like to manage the people aspect of those changes – so important in this line of work.

That world suited me, and I knew that I still had a lot to offer.

## **The People Factor and keeping people away from the griddle**

After 3 decades in the industry, I undertook an MSc in International HR to allow me to work further afield. That coincided nicely with a role working for a small hospitality company in Europe and made me realise that – although daunting to some – working cross-border wasn't that different to what I'd been used to in the UK – once cultures and legislation differences had been mastered.

However, the biggest thing I realised was that if I truly wanted to make a difference and show how people should be treated right, I needed to lead from the front. And so, The People Factor was borne.

As well as building a dedicated and happy team here, we're now able to help organisations of all sizes in the hospitality and leisure industries worldwide; managing and solving their HR issues and safeguarding them from making people mistakes, particularly with mergers, acquisitions and restructures.



### **Looking after your people will always be good for business**

Looking back, my experiences directly influenced what I've been doing, and why, for the last 30+ years.

And now, writing this, it all makes sense: I got my hand scorched so that organisations – and their people – won't get their fingers burnt.

More than ever, I'm absolutely convinced that if you train and treat people right, fairly and with respect, they'll quickly become your greatest asset and will stick around giving their best in a job they love.

That's how The People Factor makes the biggest difference: we love what we do and help businesses get their HR right so that they can avoid the risk of things going wrong.

And that's what good HR is all about.

*Karen*

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