

# Painless growth

To manage a growing workforce, the Expanse Hotel signed up to Mentor and found a systematic approach to employment law. Mark Alexander reports.

**R**emaining independent has its ups and downs. On the one hand, you're able to control the direction of your business, while on the other you have to contend with the corporate giants of this world.

There are many ways of dealing with competition, but Neil Wilks, Director of the Expanse Hotel, Bridlington, says it all boils down to service.

"It's about how people treat you, that's how the independents survive against the big boys," he says. "Hotel chains market themselves vigorously while we rely on word of mouth, therefore the interface between our staff and our guests is absolutely critical. We can't afford for it to go wrong."

## relationship advice

The 50-bedroom hotel, built by Neil's family in 1937, overlooks Bridlington Bay on the East Yorkshire coast. The ideal location means the sea-front business enjoys 60% occupancy rates and high demand for its function suite, which was opened six years ago. The 140-capacity suite was a considerable undertaking and coincided with a new five-day shift pattern which replaced a five-and-half-day arrangement.

A new function room and shorter working week led to a 20% increase in staff and significant changes at the Expanse Hotel.

"Because we're a family firm, we tend to have close working relationships with our staff, but with more people on board, it was difficult to retain those relationships."

Neil says that before the function suite arrived, staffing issues were shared, unsuccessfully, among the directors. "We did it in-house, but it wasn't working," he admits. "With an influx of new staff, we weren't able to cope.

We needed valid and up-to-date employment guidance. We needed to become more systematic."

The Expanse Hotel signed up for Mentor in 2001 and it was a decisive moment that helped the business struc-

ture its staff management strategy more effectively. "The sheer volume of rules and legislation meant there were far more elephant traps for firms like ours and a greater likelihood that you'd end up in the bottom of one if you didn't do things properly. We needed to be more on the ball and the beauty of Mentor was that it made us do things in a structured way. Any temptation to cut corners went out the window, because we knew we weren't covered if we didn't follow the procedures."

With a dedicated Mentor team providing support on employment issues around the clock, the hotel now had a single point of contact that enables Neil to focus on the business rather than on staffing issues. "Staff-related items take up a lot of our time, but they take up less time since we started using Mentor," he says.

"We have a single port of call. If we think

we have a problem, we pick up the phone and Mentor advises us. Like most small firms, we're reactive rather than proactive, but Mentor allows us to take staffing out of that equation and gives us more time to be

proactive with our business."

The hotel uses Mentor to establish best practice procedures and tackle issues as they happen. Because the service is available whenever it is needed, Neil says the

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Neil Wilks, Expanse Hotel

number of calls to the Advice Line varies enormously. "It tends to go in ebbs and flows – sometimes I'll be on the phone four or five times a week and then months will pass when I don't speak to them at all. It just depends." He admits, however, simply knowing the service is there is a comfort. "It gives me peace of mind and a friendly voice at the end of the phone to speak to, even at the weekends."

## guiding light

In practical terms, Mentor gives staff at the Expanse Hotel a set of defined guidelines to follow when certain situations arise and means the business doesn't have to hire a dedicated HR person. "Had we not gone down the Mentor route," Neil says, "we would have needed someone on the HR side, but we would still have needed legal advice anyway. In terms of savings, I don't think you

can get anyone useful for less than £25,000 per annum.”

Mentor has allowed Neil to focus on his guests, staff and, more importantly, his business. “It has got us out of a number of potentially tricky situations,” he admits. “It’s hard to quantify what might have happened had we not done something, but we feel we are better employers and have more time to keep in touch with our staff and our guests. Previously, it was done on the hoof. Now we talk to Mentor.”



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