

# HYB26

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HY8



# It's Time to Rewrite Hospitality's Story for the Next Generation

Future workforce

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CDR

*Christina Reti, Founder and CEO of CDR Global, reflects on why hospitality keeps losing young talent to misconception rather than reality. She argues that hotels remain one of the rare industries where starting at the bottom can lead to global leadership, but only if the sector updates its message and its internal practices, with clearer growth routes, stronger coaching, and workplaces that feel modern, purposeful, and human.*

I've spent my whole career in hospitality and travel, and I've never accepted the idea that young people "don't want to work in hotels." What I have seen, though, is that many don't want to work in industries that feel old-fashioned, hierarchical, or purpose-light. Unfortunately, that is still how hospitality is often described to them.

But the story they're hearing is not the one I've lived. And it's not the one the industry offers.

Currently, the Travel & Tourism sector is one of the most powerful job engines on the planet. It's growing faster than the broader economy, creating millions of new roles over the next decade, and serving as one of the most accessible gateways into global employment. At the same time, the talent pipeline is tightening everywhere: ageing populations, shifting values, rising skill requirements, and a generation that is questioning the meaning of work itself.

So, we face a choice. Either we allow hospitality to be defined by outdated ideas about servitude and sacrifice, or we intentionally rewrite its narrative as a place of upward mobility, human impact, and leadership development.

I think the next five years will determine which path we take.

## **I STARTED AT THE BOTTOM—LIKE ALMOST EVERYONE ELSE I KNOW.**

In hospitality, the CEO who once washed dishes is not a myth. It's a cliché because it's so common. I've met general managers who began as bell attendants. Regional presidents who started serving tables. Senior executives who paid their way through school by housekeeping or night auditing.

It's one of the few industries where a young person can start anywhere, literally anywhere, and end up everywhere.

But that message is not reaching the people who need to hear it. Many young candidates arrive assuming hospitality is a temporary job, a stepping stone, a "meanwhile." They don't see it as a field where curiosity, grit, emotional intelligence, and resilience can launch a lifelong career.

I once asked a group of university students what they thought "entry-level" meant in our industry. The most common answer was: "low paid and no path out." My answer back was: "Or the first chapter of a global career."

The gap between those two visions is the space we need to fill.

## **WHY THE OLD STORY NO LONGER FITS—AND NEVER REALLY DID**

For decades, hospitality has been framed as a sector you go *into* but eventually plan to *leave*. This sentiment made sense in an era characterised by rigid hierarchies, slow promotions, and manual processes that left little time for creativity or personal growth.

But that world is disappearing.

Technology is transforming the operational backbone of hotels. Automation is reducing repetitive tasks. Digital tools are simplifying workflows. Hybrid models are emerging. And the work that remains, the deeply human work, is becoming more valuable, not less.

A role that once seemed predictable now requires problem-solving, emotional intelligence, data fluency, improvisation, and real-time leadership.

The idea of hospitality as "servitude" collapses the moment you understand what frontline teams do today.

They run complex, high-speed micro-businesses. They negotiate, anticipate, prioritise, and adapt. They mediate conflict, stabilise crises, and deliver experience design on the fly. They navigate cultural nuance, guest psychology, and operational pressure, all while projecting warmth and calm.

Show me another sector that builds those muscles so fast.

## **THE NEXT GENERATION ISN'T REJECTING HOSPITALITY—THEY'RE REJECTING THE WRONG VERSION OF IT.**

Young people today are not avoiding hard work. They're avoiding meaningless work. And they are incredibly clear-eyed about what they want:

- meaningful responsibility
- growth and mobility
- psychological safety
- visible pathways
- leaders who actually listen
- environments where they can be themselves
- and work that aligns with their values

Hospitality can offer all of this if we choose to tell that story honestly and architect it intentionally.

I've met 22-year-olds who are already supervising multicultural teams of twenty people. I've met young graduates who are responsible for revenue strategy, guest experience adaptation, or sustainability initiatives within their first year of employment. I've seen trainees become managers in under two years because they were curious, coachable, and engaged.

However, unless we connect these examples to a broader narrative about opportunity, the misconceptions will prevail.

## WHY THE NEXT FIVE YEARS MATTER SO MUCH

Here's what I think is coming and why this moment is so important.

### 1 THE INDUSTRY IS TRANSFORMING FASTER THAN ITS TALENT NARRATIVE

Technology, sustainability, and shifting consumer expectations are all converging. Hotels are becoming experience platforms, wellness hubs, digital ecosystems, and amplifiers of local culture. None of this can happen without skilled, motivated talent. However, the story we're telling young people still sounds like it was from 1998.

### 2 LEADERSHIP ROLES ARE CHANGING—AND WIDENING

The next generation of leaders will need digital literacy, cultural intelligence, adaptability, creative thinking, and strategic judgement. These skills are often learned fastest in operational environments, not corporate boardrooms. Hospitality, without even trying, is a natural incubator for leadership. We need to claim that.

### 3 WORKFORCE SHORTAGES ARE NOT GOING AWAY

Many countries simply do not have a sufficient working-age population to meet the rising demand. That means talent competition will intensify. Industries that know how to attract, develop, and elevate young people will win. Those who rely on old reputations will lose.

Hospitality can't assume it will remain the default employer for entry-level talent. It needs to *earn* that position.

### 4 YOUNG WORKERS ARE RE-EVALUATING WHAT MATTERS

They care about:

- wellbeing
- personal development
- inclusive cultures
- flexibility (where it's possible)
- technology-enabled work
- and feeling valued, not used

These are not unreasonable desires; they are futureproofing mechanisms. The industry's ability to integrate them will determine who joins, who stays, and who grows.

## SO: WHAT STORY SHOULD WE BE TELLING?

If I could reintroduce hospitality to the next generation, this is what I would say.

### “THIS IS A PEOPLE INDUSTRY—AND PEOPLE INDUSTRIES SHAPE LIVES.”

We don't produce things. We create experiences that often become lifelong memories. That is impact. That is purpose. That is meaningful work.

### “YOUR STARTING POINT HAS NOTHING TO DO WITH YOUR CEILING.”

The beauty of hospitality is that it doesn't care where you begin. What matters is your curiosity, emotional intelligence, consistency, and desire to learn. The runway is long and wide if you want it to be

### “YOU WILL GAIN SKILLS HERE THAT THE FUTURE ECONOMY DESPERATELY NEEDS.”

Resilience, improvisation, empathy, conflict management, systems thinking, collaboration, and leadership under pressure; every industry will need more of these skills. Very few build it like hospitality does.

### “YOU DON'T HAVE TO CHOOSE BETWEEN TECHNOLOGY AND HUMANITY.”

The future workforce in hotels will be a hybrid one. Digital tools will handle the repeatable tasks, allowing people to focus on the work that requires judgment, creativity, and emotional connection. It's a complementary system, not a competitive one.

## AND INSIDE THE INDUSTRY, WE HAVE ANOTHER JOB TO DO

We can't just rewrite the story outwardly. We need to redesign the experience internally.

That means:

- clearer and faster career pathways
- better leadership development
- more intentional onboarding
- smarter scheduling
- cultures that prioritise wellbeing
- recognition that actually feels like recognition
- managers who are trained to coach, not command
- and workplaces where people feel welcomed, not worn down

Hospitality is inherently human. If people don't feel cared for internally, it's almost impossible for them to deliver care externally.

## MY HOPE FOR THE YEARS AHEAD

If there is one thing I know, it is this: hospitality changes people. It builds them. It shapes their perspectives, confidence, global awareness, resilience, and emotional intelligence.

I've watched individuals transform through this industry. I've watched them arrive shy, uncertain, or unsure of their place—and leave with a sense of competence and possibility they didn't know they had.

We need to tell that story.

We need to show that story.

We need to live that story.

Because the next generation isn't looking for perfection, they're looking for purpose, possibility, and a place where they can grow.

Hospitality can be that place, if we rewrite the narrative, intentionally and boldly, and if we back our words with real action.

The industry needs talent. And talent needs an industry that sees them, supports them, develops them, and believes in what they're capable of.

For me, that is the hospitality story worth telling in 2026, and long after.

