

Interview with Edge Hotel School alumnus James O'Connor



James was one of the first EHS alumni. Now 26, he is enjoying being part of the entertainment industry as Regional Sales Manager for ***sbe Lifestyle Hospitality***, who operate luxury hotels, restaurants and nightclubs.

It's been six years since you graduated from the Edge Hotel School. Looking back, what would you say were the main benefits of studying at EHS?

"Being able to experience so many of the different aspects of hospitality. Being at EHS gave you the opportunity to test the water in the areas that were of interest. Whether that was housekeeping, events or restaurant service."

"There's a great culture to being part of EHS – it's so different to any other university course. It's intensive but gives you a real head start in your career. It also helps that so many other EHS graduates are out in industry – it's great to have a network of friends and contacts to help develop your career even further."



What opportunities did you have during your studies to meet people in the industry? And how did that help you?

"There were lots of opportunities to visit different hotels and attend trade shows – which really help to build your network. You get to work with industry leaders and that gives a real insight into all the possibilities the industry offers. The course covers a lot of theory as well – useful things like understanding industry trends. It also builds your practical skills. I didn't enjoy giving presentations but doing this within the course really prepared me for doing this for real to my managers and clients.

EHS gives you the experiences you need and teaches you what you need to develop further to help you succeed in your career.

What do you think are the most important skills you need to succeed in the hospitality industry and how did EHS help you develop them?

"You need to be positive and have a passion for the industry. The past year has been so difficult with many staff losing their jobs and some people would be reluctant to go into an industry that has been so hard hit by the pandemic. But my experience at EHS has helped me to stay positive and that's been a real help both professionally and personally. There's been a real spotlight on employee's mental health and it's so important to enjoy and be positive about what you're doing. When you are doing what you have a passion for, it really shines through everything you do."



What's the best piece of advice you've received since starting out in the industry?

"It's a bit of a cliché but the most important piece of advice I've been given was 'if you enjoy what you're doing, the long hours which can be hard and stressful, won't feel like work'. It really makes a difference if you're doing something you love and are passionate about."

You've mentioned before how the hospitality industry has been particularly affected by Covid-19. How has it affected you? And what would you say to a young person thinking about a career in hospitality now?

"At *sbe Lifestyle Hospitality*, we found the pandemic really impacted on our international market. We had to change focus to the domestic markets which are fiercely competitive. We had to become creative in our approach and remind our guests and clients why they wanted the sort of luxury stay we offer. We've also focused on building strong partnerships and relationships – that's what keeps the industry strong."

My advice to anyone in the industry or considering it as a career is to stay positive.

"Hospitality is starting to re-open again and lots of opportunities are being created, with new roles available which may not have been there pre-pandemic. Focus on the aspects of the industry that you enjoy, take pleasure in the small things and stay positive."

Well that's a very positive approach! Thinking about your own career, where do you see yourself in 5 years' time?

"Well in 5 years I hope to be a Director of Sales – or Assistant Director at least! Definitely still within the entertainment sector but that's the goal. Ambitious I know but that's my aim!"

Ambitious but we're sure you're already on track and hope that you'll keep in touch with us here at Edge to tell us where your passion and positivity has taken you!

To find out more about studying at the Edge Hotel School visit:
<https://www.essex.ac.uk/departments/edge-hotel-school>