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Two different paths to success

Your Job speaks to two high flyers at the top of their game from Inverlochy Castle Management International (ICMI) to find out how two very different paths can have their own success stories.

Kerry Watson and Aileen MacKinnon's careers started out quite differently, Kerry chose university while Aileen chose full-time employment. Right now, many young people are making similar choices. And with a shortage in university places and mounting student debts, averaging £25,000, is a new trend emerging with more and more young people skipping the queue and jumping straight onto the career ladder?

Kerry Watson, operations manager for Inverlochy Castle Management International (ICMI), began her career by embarking on a degree. Four years later, she graduated with distinction in Business Information Management from Glasgow Caledonian University.

"University gave me a great understanding of business and best practices, something we use every day, but it was a lot more than that - it was a great all round experience," she said.

Since her student days, Kerry has quickly climbed the ladder at Inverlochy Castle, which started as a weekend job when Kerry was just 12. Under the leadership of ICMI's Norbert Lieder, she now manages some of the country's most exclusive hotels, including Inverlochy Castle, which has held a Michelin Star for over a decade and Inverness' Rocpool Reserve, boasting Chez Roux's first Scottish restaurant.

"Originally I planned to join the Navy but a skiing accident halted my plans. On returning from a year in Australia, where I had worked in catering, I decided to follow in my mum's footsteps and go into high-end hotel management. Having worked in bars and restaurants during university and at Inverlochy in the summer months, I liked the buzz of working in hotels.

"After university, my first position was working as a Duty and Restaurant Manager for Relais & Chateau in Kinnaird before moving back to Inverlochy Castle as a Senior Assistant Manager for three years. I moved within ICMI and to Rocpool Reserve to launch Albert Roux's first Scottish restaurant in May 2009.

"Working with a perfectionist, like Mr Roux, who has spent a lifetime in the kitchen is a great lesson. His attention to detail and vision to bring French Country Cooking to the Highlands is testimony to why he commands so much respect within the industry."

Albert Roux is just one of seven industry experts in ICMI who work alongside Kerry on a daily basis. The management team scooped seven awards at the Scottish Hotel Awards in 2010, with each of their properties winning awards and being named Hotel Management Company of the Year, 2010. It's been a whirlwind year for the new company who launched

two new properties this year alone, Inver Lodge Hotel in Lochinver and Greywalls in Edinburgh.

“The whole team has worked tremendously hard and we’re delighted with the rewards we’ve received this year. We each have a great respect for the different talents which go into making a hotel a great success. We are constantly adapting and changing to the market but one thing all our properties strive to do is to pay attention to the details and provide the best service which our customers have come to expect.”

But does Kerry attribute her rise in the career ladder to her degree in business. In this increasingly competitive job market, is a degree essential to working in the industry?

Kerry says, “University was the right path for me at that time. As a manager, I look for the best candidate and sometimes that comes with a degree and other times it does not. It’s important potential employees have an understanding of the organisation and a willingness to learn. If you’re good enough, we’re willing to invest in our people.”

Aileen Mackinnon, manager of Rocpool Reserve, took the alternative route and at age 16 she began full-time employment as a waitress at Inverloch Castle.

“On leaving school, I knew I wanted a career in the hotel and hospitality industry and I decided to go straight into the industry. My training at Inverloch gave me essential experience and a full knowledge of the high standards expected.

“Like Kerry, I travelled for a year and went to New Zealand, where I spent some time working in a vineyard in the Marlborough region of the South Island. Seeing wine produced firsthand gave me an appreciation of this process and a passion to continue working in my chosen career.

“Upon returning to the UK, I went to work for a period for the Seaham Hall in County-Durham, a leading hotel with one Michelin Star. In 2002, I decided to make the move back to Inverloch Castle as I was looking to advance my career. This time, I took up the role as Chef de Rang and over the next seven years I worked up the ranks, from Head Waitress to Restaurant Manager onto Duty Manager. The in-house training I received gave me the confidence to assume more and more responsibility and elevate in my career.”

To some extent, Aileen and Kerry have followed similar paths and both worked together in Inverloch Castle and Rocpool Reserve. Kerry’s promotion to Operations Manager in 2010, allowed Aileen to take over the running of the award-winning Rocpool Reserve in Inverness. Aileen stepped up to her new role as General Manager of Rocpool Reserve after working with Kerry as an Assistant Manager. Kerry and Aileen’s careers have both progressed significantly by working through the ranks and learning the business from the grassroots up, showing how two very different paths can each have their own success stories.

Aileen says: “I’ve never regretted not going to university in my younger years. I’ve been able to develop my skills through hands-on-experience and this has proved the best education I could have wanted for my chosen career. If you have the right attitude and are willing to put the hours in, you will see the results at the end of the day.”

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