

**Experiential Learning Student Success Story: Matt Gifford, Guest Service Manager at The Residence Inn by Marriott**



**Q: Who are you and what do you do?**

A: My name is Matt Gifford and I'm the Front Office Manager at the Residence Inn by Marriott.

**Q: Can you tell us about your first co-op experience?**

A: My first and only co-op experience was in grade 11 at the Les Suites Hotel in Ottawa. I spent my mornings in school and went to the hotel in the afternoons. I was young and didn't have a lot of experience in the working world, but I had previously worked at a bed and breakfast as a gardener, so I knew that hospitality was something I might be interested in trying. My teacher had also suggested that co-op might be a good choice for me as I wasn't the most scholastic student, and didn't love sitting in class every day. Like many, I'm a huge hands on learner, and co-op offered me an opportunity to get my hands dirty and learn about businesses, whether it led to a future career path or not.

I ended up at Les Suites Hotel for a co-op placement. I was hesitant because I had heard that in most co-op placements students sit at a desk, filing paperwork, and photocopying. When I arrived, however, my boss had a set plan for me, where I was exposed to all the different departments of the business. It was exactly what I thought a co-op experience should be. I did everything from checking in guests, to helping the accounting team, to making sales calls. I felt valued as a member of the team, and I came away with a real feeling of what the hospitality industry was all about.

**Q: How did co-operative education placement prepare for or help you choose a career?**

A: The biggest thing for me was my mentor who had a well-thought out plan for what I would achieve. He understood that a co-op student wasn't just an extra set of hands in the hotel; they were a potential future employee or manager. Having a well-rounded placement opened my eyes to the vast industry of hospitality.

**Q: Tell us a bit about what you did post high-school to advance your career. Did co-op help you get into the industry?**

A: I wasn't hired right out of the gate, but my boss gave me an opportunity to work as an assistant concierge for a short period of time during Winterlude – a busy season in Ottawa. It wasn't permanent, but it was something to put on my resume.

After high school, I immediately went to college for a diploma in restaurant and hotel management at Algonquin College, which was a direct result of my coop placement. I worked at a retirement home at the front desk part-time while I was in school. After that, I was shortly hired back as a full-time concierge at Les Suites Hotel.

**Q: Would you recommend co-op to someone who wants to enter the hospitality industry?**

A: If you have an interest in hospitality, co-op is almost a must. Hospitality is a challenging industry, and a lot of people think it's simpler than it is. To succeed, you must be team oriented, and you're always dealing with multiple situations at once. Co-op gives you good exposure to those things.

**Q: Was there one particular mentor who helped you during your co-op experience? What kind of environment did they help to create?**

A: Steve Georgopoulos was my mentor at my first co-op placement, and was the foundation to my career. He challenged me in a lot of ways, both professionally and personally. That's the type of mentor you need. Also, David Smythe at The Lord Elgin was instrumental in helping me to continue my education and employment.

**Q: Did you develop any skills in coop that still apply in your career today?**

A: The biggest thing I learned was public speaking. My mentor challenged me to speak in front of people at a young age. He put me on the spot a few times and it was definitely a challenge, but I'm a better person for it.