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# Making Non-Career Jobs Attractive to Younger Workers

## **Abstract**

As most hospitality industry managers in the U.S. are already aware, there is a growing and persistent shortage of labor available for service-sector, non-career jobs, the very jobs so vital to the industry. In most cases, recruitment efforts for these jobs are targeted toward younger workers, those under age 25. The authors explore issues regarding the attractiveness of non-career jobs in the eyes of young persons and suggest that, in addition to factors related to the job itself (pay, hours, type of work), the type of procedures used by employers to make selection decisions are equally influential. Recommendations are made concerning how hospitality employers with non-career positions to fill can maximize the chances of successfully staffing their organizations.

## Making Non-Career Jobs Attractive to Younger Workers

by  
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Richard J. Wagner

*As most hospitality industry managers in the U.S. are already aware, there is a growing and persistent shortage of labor available for service-sector, non-career jobs, the very jobs so vital to the industry. In most cases, recruitment efforts for these jobs are targeted toward younger workers, those under age 25. The authors explore issues regarding the attractiveness of non-career jobs in the eyes of young persons and suggest that, in addition to factors related to the job itself (pay, hours, type of work), the type of procedures used by employers to make selection decisions are equally influential. Recommendations are made concerning how hospitality employers with non-career positions to fill can maximize the chances of successfully staffing their organizations.*

The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) estimates that by the year 2000 over 15 million new jobs will be created in the retail and services sector of the economy.<sup>1</sup> Of these, roughly three million will be new additions to the hospitality industry workforce.<sup>2</sup> Many of these jobs will be of the “non-career” type, previously defined by Wagner and Fulford as “jobs which are temporary, and often part-time in nature, and which do not relate to the jobholder’s overall career goals and aspirations.”<sup>3</sup> Non-career jobs, represent a large portion of those in the hospitality industry, including most quick service and other restaurant jobs, some “front of house” and certain other “back of house” positions in hotels, retail clerks, a number of customer service/sales positions, youth camp counselors, and the like. At the same time that the demand for workers in this area is growing, the supply of workers who have traditionally held these types of jobs (youth, aged 16-24) is declining. After World War II, the U.S. birthrate grew rapidly, which later swelled the number of young people entering the workforce in the 1960s and 1970s. However, the number of births in the U.S. declined sharply between 1965 and 1979<sup>4</sup> and, thus, as the “baby-boomers” move toward middle age, the number of young workers is rapidly declining.

This situation has caused the National Retail Merchants Association to conclude that "in most of the U.S., American youth has become a much sought after commodity."<sup>5</sup> The BLS predicts that the number of youths (16-24) in the workforce will decline from over 25 million in 1981 to around 18 million in 1995,<sup>6</sup> thus causing a shortage of the workers that the hospitality industry needs to attract. What makes a non-career job attractive to American youth is a critical issue to the hospitality industry which employs large numbers of non-career workers.

### **Previous Research Addresses Career, Not Non-Career Issues**

Research in the area of job choice (why people choose a particular job) is quite widespread in the literature. However, this research has generally focused on issues related to career job choice, and not on non-career job choice. For example, Schwab, Rynes, and Aldag reviewed and summarized the research in the area of career job choice, and proposed a model of the "basic elements and processes that typically comprise an individual's job search and evaluation behaviors."<sup>7</sup>

The elements of a portion of the model represent the individual and labor market factors which will impact the basic job search and job choice process. These elements are normally beyond the control of both the individual job seeker and the prospective employer, at least in the short run. The elements in the other portion of the model describe the actual job search and choice process. These elements are generally under at least some control by either the job seeker or the prospective employer and, as a result, have appropriately dominated the job choice literature. These elements describe a basic model of job search and choice and can be summarized as follows:

**Job search —————> Evaluation of alternatives —————> Job choice**

Although there have been many studies conducted on job search issues, most have concentrated on the content of the job itself and how it affected one's decision to accept or reject a job offer (the evaluation of alternatives). For example, an early attempt to find out what was really important to job applicants when selecting a job was begun by Jurgensen in the 1940s. This study looked at how 55,000 applicants to a public utility ranked the importance of 10 job attributes (pay, benefits, type of work, hours, working conditions, supervisor, co-workers, company, security, and advancement) when selecting a career job.<sup>8</sup> Other studies<sup>9</sup> have also used Jurgensen's job content attributes, as well as additional attributes (i.e., location, company growth, etc.).

Unfortunately, there has been a dearth of research in the area of non-career employment. No research could be found on non-career job search, perhaps because job search is much less systematic for non-career versus career employment. Apparently, young persons have no need to systematically search for non-career jobs because they are so plentiful. The large number of non-career positions available within

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**Exhibit 1**  
**Importance of Job Attributes In Career Versus Non-Career**  
**Employment Decisions of Younger Workers\***

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Rank	Career		Non-Career	
	Males	Females	Males	Females
1	Security	Type of work	Pay	Type of work
2	Type of work	Company	Type of work	Pay
3	Advancement	Co-workers	Hours	Hours
4	Pay	Security	Co-workers	Work conditions
5	Company	Advancement	Supervisor	Security
6	Co-workers	Supervisor	Work conditions	Co-workers
7	Supervisor	Work conditions	Advancement	Supervisor
8	Hours	Pay	Security	Benefits
9	Benefits	Hours	Benefits	Company
10	Work conditions	Benefits	Company	Advancement

\*Taken in part from C.E. Jurgensen, "Job Preference (What Makes a Job Good or Bad)," *Journal of Applied Psychology* (Fall 1978): 269-270 and R.J. Wagner and M.D. Fulford, "Non-Career Employment Decisions and Their Impact on Small Business," *Journal of Small Business Management* (July 1989): 42-43.

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the hospitality industry is evidenced by several chain-operated quick service restaurants hanging banners from their buildings advertising job openings and starting wages. With some estimates of turnover as high as 400 percent within certain segments of the industry,<sup>10</sup> is it any wonder so many opportunities exist for non-career employment?

Since job search appears to be a relatively moot issue pertaining to non-career employment, attention toward job choice becomes paramount. Regarding the content of non-career jobs and how it affects job choice, only two previous studies could be identified. One looked at the non-career job market, but focused exclusively on the characteristics of the interview.<sup>11</sup> A more recent study by Wagner and Fulford<sup>12</sup> utilized Jurgensen's methodology, but respondents were those most representative of non-career workers: high school and college students. Results indicated that non-career decisions were made for different reasons than career decisions (see Exhibit 1).

Referring to Exhibit 1, it appears that the job attributes which yield short-term feedback (pay, hours, and type of work) are considered by younger workers as more important than the attributes with a long-term return (advancement, security, and the company itself) in making non-career decisions. The opposite appears to be true for career decisions.

### **Ability to Alter Job Content Is Restricted**

Given the job attributes that are most important to younger workers when making non-career decisions, is the answer to the hospitality employer with non-career positions to fill simply to offer higher wages, more flexible hours, and more challenging work assignments than competitors? If each of these actions were possible, then perhaps the answer would be in the affirmative. But, one must remember that economic and operational constraints on hospitality employers make some of these actions difficult, if not impossible.

Wages are somewhat controllable by the employer, but only to the extent that they can be increased as high as profits allow. Some of the flexibility in this area has been removed since the increase in the minimum wage took effect on April 1, 1991. Since most non-career jobs require minimal skills, wages that are offered to those performing such jobs are going to be at the lower ends of employers' wage scales. With the raising of the "floor" of the wage scales (due to the increased minimum wage) at the same time the "ceiling" remains in place, there is less "play" in the system and, therefore, fewer opportunities to significantly raise wages of those at the lower end of the scale. Besides, it is widespread practice within the hospitality industry to offer wages comparable to competitors for line level positions. So, even if a particular employer were to raise the wages offered for non-career jobs, most competitors would soon follow suit and all competitive advantage would be lost.

Hours of work are fairly inflexible in an industry which operates, for the most part, 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. Even those operations which do not fit that description, such as most quick service restaurants, have other constraints. Oftentimes, hours of operation are set by franchise agreements. Or, if located in a large commercial outlet, such as a mall, the outlet determines the hours of operation of its lessees. In addition, all those who employ workers under the age of 18 must abide by the regulations of the Fair Labor Standards Act which restrict the hours of such workers. Therefore, it becomes difficult to offer younger workers more flexible hours than competitors are able to offer.

Type of work is basically the same across all non-career jobs within the hospitality industry. Most non-career jobs require minimal skills and, therefore, the ability to offer challenging work assignments is limited. This is not to imply that non-career jobs are boring or repetitive but rather to point out that they all require roughly the same level of skills to accomplish the job. Some tactics that may be tried in this realm are job rotation where the employee is moved on a regular basis from one job to another which requires the same skill level or job enlargement where the number of tasks for which each employee is responsible is increased.

### **Selection System May Offer Competitive Advantage**

Since it appears that non-career employees engage in very little systematic job search activity, the only information which the younger worker has as a basis for a decision regarding a non-career employment offer is the content of the job and the procedures used by the employer to determine whether or not to make the offer. If very little can be done to alter the content of non-career jobs, then how can hospitality employers increase the attractiveness of their available non-career positions to younger workers? The specific attributes of the selection system used by the employer often determine whether the younger worker accepts or rejects the non-career employment offer. The attractiveness of the non-career job may be dependent on the nature of the interaction between employer and applicant before the job offer is extended.

In order to determine the perceived importance of some selection system attributes on non-career job choice of young persons, a study was designed to look at the relative importance of a number of selection system attributes compared to job content attributes. All of the content attributes from previous research, as well as some selection system attributes identified as important determinants of job choice in the career job choice literature were included on the questionnaire. Instead of asking participants to rank-order a list of attributes, they were asked to evaluate the importance of each of these attributes using a 5-point Likert response format (1 = of no importance at all; 5 = of major importance) in seeking a non-career job.

Participants were 781 college juniors and seniors at three major state universities in the Midwest. All of the respondents indicated that they had previously held, or were currently working in, a non-career job. All students participated voluntarily, and received no credit for participation. The average age of the participants was 22, and the sample was 54 percent female.

Respondents rated the importance of 28 attributes, 15 job content attributes, and 13 selection system attributes. The attributes, listed by mean importance, are shown in Exhibit 2.

While not surprising that several content attributes (opportunity for responsibility, challenging work, pay) were considered very important in determining the attractiveness of a non-career job, the results of the current survey also suggest that some attributes of the selection system may play an important role in non-career job choice. Specifically, being allowed to ask questions in the interview, receiving important information about the job during the interview, and receiving a prompt follow-up to the initial meeting all were rated as being important or very important when seeking non-career employment.

### **Employers Urged to Adopt "Attractive" Selection System**

While certain content attributes, like pay and type of work, continued to be rated as important or extremely important, this survey shows that selection system attributes may be more important than previously thought in determining a young person's choice of a non-career job.

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**Exhibit 2**  
**Importance of Content and Selection System Attributes**

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<b>Attributes</b>	<b>Mean</b>
1) The opportunity to assume responsibility (C)	4.6
2) Being challenged by the job (C)	4.6
3) Being paid what I am worth (C)	4.6
4) Work which is varied and not boring (C)	4.4
5) Being given important information on the job during the interview (S)	4.2
6) Advancement (C)	4.2
7) Company provided benefits (C)	4.2
8) Being allowed to ask questions in the interview (S)	4.2
9) Receiving a prompt follow-up after the interview (S)	4.2
10) A company I can be proud of (C)	4.0
11) Being allowed to express myself in the interview (S)	3.8
12) A comfortable working environment (C)	3.8
13) Co-workers that I like (C)	3.8
14) Working in a job related to my career goals (C)	3.8
15) Company paid insurance benefits (C)	3.7
16) A boss who praises good performance (C)	3.6
17) Time off when I want it (C)	3.5
18) Being interviewed by the Manager, not an assistant (S)	3.3
19) Being asked interview questions which relate to the job (S)	3.2
20) Not having to answer interview questions that are personal in nature (S)	3.1
21) Not having an interview that follows a strict pattern (S)	3.0
22) Working close to where I live (C)	3.0
23) Not having to complete an honesty test (S)	2.9
24) Completing a short (not lengthy) application blank (S)	2.7
25) Not having to take a physical exam (S)	2.7
26) Not having to take a bunch of psychological tests (S)	2.7
27) Not having to take a drug test (S)	2.6
28) Working with people I know from school (C)	1.7

(C) = content variable                      (S) = selection system variable  
SCALE: (1) = of no importance at all; (5) = of major importance

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The interview itself is seen as the critical contact between the applicant and the non-career employer, and the importance of this contact is clearly shown by this study. If applicants are not given meaningful job information, they appear to be less likely to accept a job offer. If applicants are not allowed to ask questions (as in the use of a highly-structured interview), then they likewise will be less prone to accept that particular job offer. Finally, the importance of a prompt follow-up with the applicant after the interview is apparent.



The implications for the hospitality industry, the traditional employers of the majority of non-career workers, are quite clear. While often limited in their ability to improve the content of the job, many important attributes of the selection system are readily controlled by even the smallest of organizations. Using a semi-structured interview, in which applicants are allowed the opportunity to express their own opinions, is quite clearly within the control of the employer.

Second, a carefully planned interview will also provide meaningful, job-related information to applicants. Thus the interview needs to be well planned, but not highly structured, and needs to emphasize important information and not spend a lot of time on trivial issues.

Third, follow-ups with the job applicants must be prompt. This means that interviewers must start the selection process with a clear understanding of what they are looking for in applicants. The selection process then needs to emphasize the identification of applicants with the needed skills. When an applicant with the required skills is found, the employer must quickly follow up to determine mutual interest in the job.

While the current study suggests that the attributes of the selection system are both within the control of the hospitality employer, and important to the non-career job applicant, it leaves a great many questions yet to be answered. Future research needs to look at the interaction of selection system attributes and job content attributes when the two are presented in combination. Research also needs to use the class of jobs called "non-career," since it is these entry-level jobs in which labor shortages are most acute. Previous research has relied almost exclusively on the career job in exploring job choice issues.

While the issue of pre-employment testing does not appear to be as important as some of the interviewing issues to non-career job applicants, some studies indicate that almost 20 percent of job applicants find certain types of tests offensive.<sup>13</sup> In a market facing severe labor shortages, this 20 percent may be the difference between full-staffing levels, and worker shortages. The current issues of drug-testing and paper and pencil honesty testing are two areas needing additional research.

In today's labor market where younger workers are becoming increasingly difficult to find, it is critical for the viability of the hospitality industry, a major non-career employer, to attract any and all available non-career employees. Given the difficulty in altering certain content factors associated with non-career jobs (pay, hours, type of work), the attractiveness of these jobs can be increased by altering the systems used to select these types of employees. Interviews, if used, must allow the applicants to ask questions and provide them with "air time" which they can use to promote their candidacy. If a decision is made to extend an offer, it must be done shortly after the interview. Each of these techniques should be quite easy to implement. Hospitality employers should be cautioned, however, that the implementation of desirable selection system attributes will not compensate for inadequate content attributes. They merely complement and enhance content attributes which are present at levels on par with the competition.

The attributes of the systems used to select non-career employees are extremely important in determining the attractiveness of the job. Employers should remember that applicants for non-career positions most likely have limited information about the potential employer and the procedures used to select applicants provides the majority of that information. Therefore, tailoring those selection procedures to provide prospective employees with the types of information for which they are looking is critical. With a few simple modifications, hospitality employers can dramatically increase the attractiveness of their non-career jobs in the eyes of younger workers.

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- <sup>13</sup>It is interesting to note that one such study was conducted by two researchers who are affiliated with a supplier of honesty tests, John W. Jones and Dennis S. Joy, "Empirical Investigation of Job Applicant's Reactions to Taking a Pre-employment Honesty Test," Paper presented at the 97th Annual Conference of the American Psychological Association, New Orleans, August 1989.

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