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In My Opinion ... If I Were a Carpenter

Abstract

Starting a career in the hospitality travel and tourism industries today requires more than a nice smile, a love of people and a willingness to help solve their problems technology and number crunching are "must have" capabilities for up-and-coming managers graduating from hospitality and tourism programs The article provides student counselors and mentors insights from industry leaders, career path choices, and questions that applicants should be asking in the decision-making process.

If I were a carpenter...

by Donald A. McPhail

Starting a career in the hospitality, travel and tourism industries today requires more than a nice smile, a love of people and a willingness to help solve their problems. Technology and number crunching are "must have" capabilities for up-and-coming managers graduating from hospitality and tourism programs. The article provides student counselors and mentors insights from industry leaders, career path choices, and questions that applicants should be asking in the decision-making process.

The fine old Tim Hardin tune provides a rustic lead-in to the questions of employment in the much anticipated year of 2000. Employment within the hospitality and tourism industries has changed dramatically during the past 10 years. It is not exactly carpentry, but nearly every job now involves more engineering and numbers analysis than public relations. The days when a large smile and a sharp crease in your Brooks Brothers suit could lead to a successful hotel or airline management career are long gone. At

the same time, there are more jobs, in more types of hospitality and tourism categories, than ever before. This is important, real-world news for college students who are planning careers in these growing, challenging, and often rewarding service industries.

In the '90s, and on into the 2Ks, literally every key management job will require technological, analytical, and planning skills. This is particularly true of hotels, airlines, convention bureaus, rental car companies, incentive houses, and destination management companies (DMCs). Some will require advanced degrees. Even smaller service organizations like caterers, restaurateurs, florists, audio-visual, or production companies depend on employees who can analyze reports, write a business plan, and prepare a cohesive proposal that contains accurate and thorough pricing. "I love people, and I love to travel!"

is no longer a legitimate basis to enter the hospitality and tourism industries.

"The key for our company is for a future or present manager to be able to analyze the numbers and to act on them," states Don Feehan, division vice president of marketing and travel industry sales for the Hertz Corporation. "Hertz has constant reviews for every department or area in the world. The numbers tell the story of success, problems, or trends. The correct interpretation of facts, called numbers, makes for a successful executive."

John Marks, president of the San Francisco Convention and Visitors Bureau, agrees. "In the hospitality industry everyone is being crunched to perform, especially in the lodging industry where yield management is key."

According to Kevin Burns, regional director of sales for British Airways, "We look for college graduates who have a good understanding of business and a basic understanding of accounting. At the same time, they must be able to write a business letter, and articulate a point of view."

David Herren, vice president for The Mark Travel Corporation, and former executive with United Airlines, adds that, "Technology will separate the winning and losing companies in the future. It already is in the travel industry. Electronic commerce has already become a big factor, thus computer skills and aptitude will be big prerequisites."

What kind of jobs are we talking about? The following sections discuss traditional career paths, such as hotels, cruise ships, and airlines; less visible categories, such as association executives, meeting planners, and incentive travel buyers; and smaller service suppliers, such as caterers, restaurateurs, florists, and event companies.

Traditional jobs abound

Certainly, the traditional career path begins with airlines, lodging, and cruise ships. These industries generally provide comprehensive training for new employees, especially in larger organizations.

Frank Kent, managing director for United Airlines, looks for accountability and commitment in his management candidates, along with interpersonal and communicating skills. "Our work requires familiarity with technology tools as they pertain to data analysis, database manipulation, time management, critical thought processes, and the ability to prioritize."

British Airways' Burns states, "Our training program for account managers takes one or two years to complete. We look for college graduates who have studied our industry and know something about our company. And we are looking for the 'fire in the belly,' that is, someone who is hungry."

Duncan Beardsley, former executive with Seabourn Cruise Lines and currently director for the Stanford Alumni Association

adds, "It takes understanding of numbers, but candidates must have a positive attitude and be able to think on their feet."

Hotels and resorts are the foundation for tourism throughout the world. They continue to offer the variety, quality, and quantity of jobs to attract the majority of hospitality and tourism majors; and the career path is in plain view within a single organization or industry. Lodging positions fall within departments such as operations, sales, marketing, catering, food and beverage, housekeeping, finance, security, and maintenance.

The cruise industry, bolstered by an expanded number of ships constructed with ever-greater capacity, provides similar job opportunities, as do the airlines — in operations, sales, marketing, food services, and finance. Additional categories include passenger services and reservations sales. Certain other airline jobs require engineering or technical degrees and licenses, such as in-flight operations (pilots and flight engineers) and maintenance.

Destination jobs expand

There are additional organizations that are well known within the industry, but often are not so familiar to college students or the general public. Nearly every destination now has a sales and marketing association called a convention and visitors bureau. Many bureau employees begin their careers at hotels, airlines, rental car com-

panies, or other industry organizations.

Career options include sales, marketing, public relations, and administration. San Francisco Convention Bureau's Marks says, "We don't hire many people right out of college. We look for experience in the field." Transportation companies, such as rental car and motor-coach companies, provide career opportunities, as do organizers and purchasers of services, such as destination management companies and tour wholesalers. Positions in these organizations usually fall into the categories of sales, operations or administration.

Hertz' Feehan states, "The one big point we look for is, 'Is this person goal oriented and willing to work hard to be successful?' Prior experience is not as important as demonstrating leadership qualities and the desire to succeed."

Mark Travel Company's Herren points out that in the tour wholesaler business, "Communication skills are critical. We also look for conceptual ability, creativity and an entrepreneurial attitude."

Buyers of group services hold unique and valuable positions in the industry and their jobs offer definite career potential. These buyers make purchasing and service decisions on behalf of associations (association executives) and corporations (corporate meeting and travel planners, and incentive travel planners). They communicate the company's or association's

needs to hotels, convention and visitors bureaus, destination management companies, and other service providers, and establish criteria for those services, usually in the form of a request for proposal. They select and contract with the service providers and oversee operation of the convention, corporate meeting, or incentive group travel program. Such jobs tend to be administrative or operational, more than sales and marketing oriented. An exception is in the field of incentive group travel. Incentive companies offer significant opportunities in sales, marketing, administration, and finance – often starting employees in field operations as trip directors.

New areas emerge

Smaller service providers include restaurateurs, caterers, florists, audio-visual and technical consultants, limousines, venue and site managers, and recreation and team building. When a company or association chooses to hold an event outside its hotel, that decision sets up a number of new service opportunities. Usually, the coordination of off-site events is handled by a destination management company, which represents the needs and interests of the client. That DMC helps in the selection of a caterer, who develops a special menu, prepares a plan, and delivers the services. Additional services are also requested from florists and private companies that provide décor, entertainers, audio-visual, light

and sound, security, and specialized transportation.

Teams of sales and operations managers offer information pricing and services at unique venues such as the Smithsonian's Air and Space Museum in Washington, D.C., Iolani Palace in Honolulu, or the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Recreational programs are created and managed by specialists in team building, or in running golf and tennis tournaments, 10K runs, or sailing regattas. Each of these sites or organizations offers employment and career opportunities. Most are limited in number, but are essential to the destination.

Armed with this general knowledge about the industry and the many possible employment segments, graduating students who are preparing for careers in hospitality and tourism have a number of options. The first actually should have come during the sophomore or junior years in college. Students should join a traditional hotel, airline, or smaller organization as an intern and look around. Another is to seek an entry-level position with a hotel, airline, or other company that catches their interest and work up the ladder. Yet another is to defer the full-time, post-graduation job choice – and probably increase employment value – by going on to graduate school.

Regardless of the option chosen, here are suggestions in a career search:

- **Decide if geography is important:** Do you want, or need, to work near family or friends in a particular geographic area? Do you want to travel and experience a variety of destinations and cultures? Do you simply not care where you work, so long as the job suits your other needs?
- **Determine your actual financial priorities:** What is more important, money and benefits, or the type of work you do?
- **Determine your actual social priorities:** How important is status, title, and company name? How important is it to “make a difference” to others in your department, your company, or society?
- **Determine where your interests are greatest:** Do you prefer making people happy and exceeding expectations, possibly leading into operations and customer service? Do you prefer solving problems and puzzles, leading to strategic planning or marketing? Do you like a single project, handled thoroughly, such as working at a single resort or cruise ship or venue? Do you prefer handling multiple locations and assignments, such as administering or marketing many destinations or routes or hotel properties?
- **Determine how you fit:** Do you like to work for others, providing services or solutions based on their criteria or their needs? Do you dislike working for others, preferring to be a purchaser of services or the person giving the orders, such as a meeting planner or association executive? Note that order-giving jobs are not usually available without extensive experience, but this aspect of your personality will be important to recognize as you establish career goals.
- **Determine how employable you really are:** Can you write or carry out a business plan, or do you need additional training? Can you understand the computations necessary to write a contract, figure a profitable gross selling price, or compute fully allocated costs? Do you already have a great new idea to start up your own venture?

It is generally understood that there is no formula for success. There are just too many variables, some predictable and some unforeseen. If we were getting out of college today, we would want to know as much about the real world of the industry that had attracted us as students. Armed with knowledge of the different industry segments and the buyer markets, we have a head start. Adding a realistic assessment of

our personal characteristics – needs and wants, like and dislikes, and marketable skills – helps develop reasonable platforms for making decisions. Assessing which opportunities fit into individual personal matrixes and which do not, which decisions would provide the kinds of experiences and successes needed to succeed and which would not, knowing the industry will change, the markets will change, and each of us will change, appears to be a sound beginning.

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