



The People Business

BY SIMON PAYN

Thousands of new jobs will be created in the Canadian hospitality industry over the next decade. Discover how graduates can position themselves for success in this constantly changing, people-facing career.

The hospitality industry in Canada is booming. Hotel chains are expanding, resort and “lifestyle” destinations are being developed, and an increasingly savvy yet time-poor clientele is demanding more and better products.

Leisure travel within Canada is expected to grow by 3.9% this year, and business travel by 3.2%. Domestic tourism, while feeling the effects of the strong loonie which is attracting Canadians south of the border, is still expected to grow by 2.8% in 2008.

Hotel chains are improving their offerings and opening new properties. Downtown Toronto alone is set for up to four new luxury hotels.

At the same time, a predicted worker shortage in the industry as baby boomers start playing golf instead of staffing the reservations desk is expected to present even greater opportunities in the future for students graduating in 2008.

A large number of savvy travellers who have experienced most of the big hotel franchises and know what they want — and what they feel they deserve — is driving product innovation and, perhaps more importantly, service levels skyward. And as it's the people who work in the industry that can make a difference to a hotel's financial success, recruiters are increasingly hiring for personality, attitude and the all-important service mentality.

While there are plenty of jobs available, recruiters are getting more picky in whom they hire. Only the best will get the best jobs, so it pays to position yourself for success.

What's Happening in Hospitality

There are several trends in the industry to be aware of.

Technology: As with many industries, technology is driving change in hospitality. From increasingly complex booking systems through to visitor tracking (to identify the best customers and monitor their needs and wants) and in-room entertainment, IT is playing a central role. For a job within hospitality that relies on technology, see Career Briefing on page 36.

Not just hotels: Resorts and other “lifestyle” venues that are more than ‘just a hotel’ are being built. This development is because people are increasingly time-poor and therefore want to squeeze as much as they can into what have become shorter – perhaps three to four days – stays, without having to change venue. Hotels are now bundled with spas, casinos, golf courses and other leisure actives. For hospitality workers, this development means that someone who is successfully working with one of the big hospitality franchises can grow their career in a path that most interests them.

It's all about the experience: Hospitality experts have for a long time said that people are paying for the experience. As Sandy Russell, the Ontario-based Senior Director, Revenue Generation, for Carlson Hotels Worldwide, says, people are looking for something a little bit different, “not just putting a head in a bed.” Indeed, new grads are expected to know about more than just the property – they need to be familiar with everything the local area can offer to provide guests with the best, all-round experience they can. Indeed, one major hotel group has put its staff in YouTube-style videos where they take guests on a tour of the city.

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HOSPITALITY

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A global industry: The big franchises have hotels in most Canadian cities and also across the globe. Indeed, it's getting hard to find a company without an international operation. The result is that there are plenty of opportunities for travel and work abroad. New grads with international experience are in demand.

Climbing the Ladder

So where does a new entrant begin?

Most new jobs for hospitality graduates are customer-facing – perhaps on the front desk or working at a table-service restaurant. Having front-line experience is important in what is perhaps the most people-focused industry there is.

But if you're good, you'll quickly move up the hierarchy. Indeed, if there's a fit between you and the hotel chain – and you are performing well in the job – it's almost a certainty you will get promoted. After all, most chains would rather promote from within than risk hiring an outsider who doesn't understand – and maybe doesn't fit – that chain's culture.

Dr. Gabor Forgacs, of the Ted Rogers School of Hospitality and Tourism Management at Ryerson University in Toronto, says there's potential for a good career for those who show they have what it takes. Some Ryerson students have moved into a management position within a year after graduation.

It's said that a candidate will go from the bottom rung to being a general manager of a large hotel in an average of 15 years. If you're smart, the progression could be twice as fast.

"If you demonstrate a natural knack of dealing with people, if you're committed, if you're enthusiastic, your skills are recognized relatively quickly and you tend to move through the ranks at a much faster than normal pace," says Robert Habeeb, President of hotel management company First Hospitality Group.

And with career progression, salary also rises:

- Entry-level management (e.g. assistant front desk manager): \$25-40K
- Management (e.g. front desk manager): \$30-60K
- Director (e.g. director of catering services): \$45-70K

Once you hit the level of being on the executive committee of a hotel, you can expect to be earning \$65-130K.

Stan Bullis, president of Unbridled Recruiting and three other hospitality-related businesses, believes the future worker shortage will push compensation higher. "Hotel industry salaries will continue to climb because hotels want to attract top talent as service is critical to their repeat business," he says.

Of course, before you earn the big bucks, you've got to get your foot in the door. Despite the rosy employment figures, recruiters are taking longer to make a hire, with candidates experiencing up to four interviews which are very much focused on that candidate's personal qualities.

Do You Have "the Gene?"

So what are the qualities the industry is looking for?

Recruiters universally talk about the "of-service" mentality. Indeed, they say you either have "the gene" or you don't have it.

"As our population gets busier and busier, that need for service grows and grows," says Bullis. "We ask, 'is this person servant-hearted and do they have the ability to innately understand a customer's needs and deliver on those needs?'"

"You discover a lot of that as you speak to people and you discover their sense of family, their commitment to community. You can pick up relatively quickly whether they like to serve others or they like to be served."

Russell says she looks for attitude, aptitude and experience. "You've got to be somebody that Joe Public wants to talk to and wants to work with," she says.

Forgacs says it's important to be a fast learner, as the hotel industry is changing so fast.


What about Quality of Life?

There's no denying it, the hospitality industry, particularly if you are in a people-facing role, isn't a 9-5 job. You will be working evenings and weekends. That's something you will have to live with, at least at the start.

If you find after a few years you want your evenings and weekends back, there are other industries that will be interested in the customer service experience you will have developed.

But working odd hours isn't always so bad. Bullis tells the story of a freelance meeting planner who works for one of his businesses,

Unbridled Travel. "He has been to over 60 countries, has dined with kings and queens, he's backpacked across Europe and is one of fewer than 50,000 people who have stood on the South Pole," says Bullis.

"Someone with that servant-hearted mentality can make a great lifestyle out of this industry." 



REVENUE MANAGEMENT

An example of how much technology is changing the hospitality industry can be seen in the field of revenue management, which is about maximizing hotel revenues in the same way that airlines maximize flight revenues. They do this by segmenting customers into various price bands depending on the services they require, and then using sophisticated forecasting techniques to set the price of each band to maximize profits.

The role is ideal for someone who loves computers and understands the Web. It's not a job you are likely to get straight from school, but you could move into it from the reservations department, for example.

MEETING PLANNING

Meeting planning is a \$120 billion industry, according to an article by consultant David M. Brudney. Planners organize events, usually for corporations. The work requires project planning, creative input, good writing skills, excellent finance skills, and good people skills.

People often move into meeting planning after starting in hotels because their experience on the ground floor of the hospitality industry is seen as valuable. The pay is usually higher, however, and the options for upward mobility are good because you are working at a high level with businesses. "You're not just in a hotel, you are dealing with multiple companies, multiple businesses across multiple industries," says Bullis. "If you're bright, it's like having multiple MBAs."



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