

Career Call: Hotelier

by Cristina Velocci



It's summer break, which means it's time to pack your suitcase and get ready to travel on vacation! There's something undeniably special about staying at a hotel: the fluffy bedding, chocolates on your pillow at night, getting room service. Ever wish you can stay at one year-round? Well you could if you worked there, and if you're good with numbers as well as with people, it might be the right career for you.

What It Is

A hotelier—more commonly referred to as a hotel general manager—oversees the everyday operations of the hotel across all of its different departments, which include rooms, food and beverage, marketing and sales. “It’s really a combination of many different roles,” says Laura Schofield, GM at the St. Regis Washington, D.C., who likens it to being the CEO as well as an ambassador who greets guests, a teacher that trains employees, a party planner (since lots of weddings and events take place in hotels) and even an interior designer who keeps up the image of the hotel through renovations.

As a result, every day is different, but it usually involves meeting with department managers to go over which guests will be arriving and how to prepare for them, checking the sales numbers and budgets and walking through the hotel to make sure everything looks good and is running smoothly. “It’s like taking care of a home, except instead of three or four bedrooms I have 183,” says Ellen Seymore, GM at Loews Denver. “It’s my job to make sure everyone is comfortable at night and that they’re having a great experience.” Schofield agrees that at the end of the day, her job essentially is to make her guests happy. “Everything you’re doing is helping people make wonderful memories,” she says. “That’s really the business you’re in.”

What It Takes

Since the nature of the hotel business is varied and unpredictable, you not only need to be flexible and open-minded but also well-rounded in your studies. Hospitality school is specifically designed to provide a broad knowledge base tailored to the hotel industry with courses ranging from economics and art history to cooking classes and wine tasting seminars. The curriculum often requires students get internships during the summer for credit, which helps open doors.

Though hotel management school isn’t necessary to enter the field, Bettina Landt, GM at the White Elephant hotel in Nantucket, strongly recommends it. “If you want to stay competitive, it gives you a basis for so many things that will help you along and gives you the chance to meet your peers in years to come,” she says. Cornell University and Les Roche Bluche in Switzerland are both renowned for their hotel management programs, but taking classes in marketing, business, international relations, economics and accounting at a liberal arts college will serve you equally well.

“Ultimately, so much of what you learn in the hotel business is going to be learning it in the hotel,” notes Schofield, who recommends learning languages



since “guests come from all over the world and there are hotels all over the world, so it opens you up career wise.”



Yet much of what it takes to be a hotelier can't be learned in a

classroom. “You need to be someone who understands human interaction because you can't be in your cubicle doing math all day,” says Debbie Swanson, GM at Santa Fe, New Mexico's Inn on the Alameda. “You have to build relationships with your guests.” Other crucial skills are organization, the ability to multitask and communicate well, and above all, patience. “A lot of times you are putting out fires,” says Swanson, “so you have to be calm in certain situations where other people can get very, very upset.”

Tools of the Trade

Hotelchatter.com covers hotel openings and provides ratings and reviews.

Check out the student membership to the American Hotel & Lodging Association (AH&LA; www.ahla.com) to learn more about the industry.

Required Reading

The Fred Factor by Mark Sanborn

100 Tips for Hoteliers by Peter Venison

Chocolates on the Pillow Aren't Enough by Jonathan M. Tisch

What to Expect ● ● ● ● ● What You Can Do Now ● ● ● ● ●

While there is a ladder to climb on the way up to GM, it isn't necessarily as clear cut as in other professions. “The beauty of it is you can work your way up through any of the departments,” says Seymore. Regardless of where you get your start, it's important to get experience in all of them along the way. “You need to have an understanding of how each of the departments work together,” says Swanson. “You want to be empathetic and make sure that the decisions you're making at the top are not going to have adverse effects as they trickle down.”

A great thing about getting into hotels is that there are so many different shifts, you can work around your schedule and take a job during the morning, afternoon or night. It also works out that busy season happens to be during the summer and holidays when schools are off, so there's no excuse not to get a part-time job or internship at your local hotel to test the waters. “It's great to have on your resume and you'll make good connections,” says Seymore, who recommends talking to someone in human resources to see what positions are available.

Whether your first job is at the front desk checking in guests or working as a night auditor in the back office, one thing that's guaranteed is long hours—expect to put in 50 to 60 a week—and that you'll likely be working holidays. “This career is something you either love or hate because you have to put a lot of time and effort in and it becomes a lifestyle,” says Landt. “It's not the kind of job you can just walk away from at 5pm. It's the kind of job that's a part of who you are.” The flip side to being on call 24-7 is that you have the opportunity to meet interesting people and live all over the world, depending on where you find your next job. “You're in a beautiful environment with wonderful food and you get to be part of exciting events,” says Schofield, who experienced the presidential inauguration this year thanks to her hotel's central D.C. location.

Another reason getting work experience now is important: “If you love this industry you will know right away,” says Landt. “If you have doubts about it, keep looking because it's an all or nothing kind of industry.”



Even if you're just curious, it's worth it to call up a hotel nearby and ask if they'll give you a tour of the back of the house so you can understand the big picture, or make an appointment with the GM for an informational interview to ask questions. Outside the hotel, there are plenty of things you can do to help prepare—most of which you're probably doing already. “It's very competitive out there, so make sure you do well in your classes,” says Swanson. “Do community service because you'll understand how to help people. In the hotel industry we're assisting people all day long.” Schofield adds, “Take every opportunity you can to grow your leadership skills, whether it's in sports or clubs, because ultimately a GM is a leader of the hotel and it will serve you very well down the road. Have fun with it.”

