

Be the player, not the ball

A good player knows how the game is played. Not just the rules, but also the skills, and the strategies needed to win. And the hospitality industry is a serious game, accounting for about 8% of all jobs worldwide.

There are many different types of business within the hospitality industry, including restaurants (the largest sector), catering, hotels, hostels, inns, pubs, cafés, nightclubs and even your local travel agent.

Although I've been involved in many sectors of the industry, either directly as an employee or manager or indirectly as an investor, most of my career has been spent in the hotel industry, so I'll limit my comments to providing career advice for aspiring hoteliers.

If you are interested in a career in hotel management, you may have visions of occupying the general manager's office in a fancy five-star hotel. You might even dream of owning your own hotel. And indeed, there are lots of opportunities for those who are willing to work hard and bring the right set of skills to the job. My first piece of advice: dream big!

But first, let's take a look at what the major hotels are looking for when they recruit managers — their star players — for their properties.

- At the top of their list is the ability to get along with people: respect for others, compassion, and the sort of social skills that put other people at ease. This ability applies not only to the hotel's guests but also to subordinates and co-workers. Are you a team player? Do you know how to lead a team?
- Another sought-after quality consists of emotional stability, i.e. being able to roll with the punches. It's easy to see why this is important in the hospitality business. In this industry no two days are the same. Guests may be upset with things that may or may not be the hotel's fault, and you need to deal with these problems in a cool, professional manner. You need to recognize that the problem is not as you see it, but as the guest perceives it. In large properties there may be a concierge on staff, but in many cases, dealing with the guest's problems becomes the general manager's responsibility. You will need to "own the problem" and resolve it for your guest. This quality is sometimes referred to as emotional intelligence, or EQ. A good player perseveres in difficult situations where others may throw in the towel.

- Managers need to have a business orientation — they must understand financial data and know a thing or two about marketing. Even when you work for a large chain where most of the marketing decisions are made at the corporate level, you still need to understand who your guests are and where they come from, and how your competition will try to steal them away. Star players are good at assessing their environments and their competitors' strengths and weaknesses.
- And finally: you will need excellent keyboard and computer skills.

So now that you know what these fine hotels are looking for, how do you stack up? Are you ready now to apply for one of those positions or do you need to refine some of your skills?

It's my belief that much of what happens to us can be traced back to things we did or did not do. That's not to say that I don't believe in lucky breaks or good fortune, but I've come across many people who complained about their lot in life when it was painfully obvious that they could have done something to avoid or at least mitigate their misery. When the forecast calls for rain and you don't bring an umbrella, don't complain about getting wet. To borrow from Louis Pasteur, fortune favors the prepared mind. So let's see how you can prepare yours.

First, let's acknowledge that not everyone is suited for a career as a hotelier. You need to be reasonably intelligent and have a positive, proactive attitude. You need good social skills and perseverance. Assuming you have those qualities, there are several things you can do to build on them. My recommendations are based on my own experience, which took place mainly in Europe.

The key to your success lies in learning. You will always be a work in progress and you will always need to learn. This process begins with your formal education. Whether you're enrolled in a hotel school or a business college (both are fine), you will need to do two things: learn and make contacts. Learn as much as you can, and in particular about what I think of as my Three Musketeers: managing, marketing and finance. And get to know the people you interact with — the faculty and your fellow students. I can't count the number of times I've been lucky enough to draw on the help of former teachers, classmates or colleagues for help in finding the right person or solving a problem.

Your learning continues when you start your first job. Of course, if you've been dreaming of becoming a star in the hotel business, your first job will more than likely have begun years before you graduate. Maybe you were working in a fast-food establishment, or waiting tables or busing, or you were washing dishes or making pizza. You were more than likely doing something involving food or lodging. And you may have taken the first job that was offered you.

But if you've played your cards right in school, and gotten good grades and learned something, your first real job will be the one you pick, i.e. you'll be able to choose from several offers. Here's where you've become the player — not a pro yet, but a skilled amateur. You're the player, and that first job is the ball.

In order to move into the professional ranks, you're going to need some experience. And there are places where you can get that experience quickly. Don't look at the five-star properties. Their clientele expects top notch service, and their management will not take a chance on a rookie. If you take a job there, you'll find yourself emptying waste baskets.

To develop quickly, you need to be exposed to action and variety. Look for any of a big city's 3 or 4-star properties. There may be some good ones in your own home town. Find a busy one and apply for a job at the front desk. Any job is okay, as long as it has you occupying the front desk. That's the nerve center.

You won't be paid very well and you'll have to do whatever you're asked. Your computer skills will come in handy here. A front desk job means you'll be checking guests in and out and performing billing and clerical duties, including handling phone calls and reservations and serving as the guests' main contact point.

As I said, you won't get paid a lot, but you can learn a lot. Think of it as continuing education and maybe you'll feel better when you realize you're being paid to learn. Just keep your eyes and ears open and see how things are done, and what the routines are. Be the player, be active. See if you can tell which of your colleagues are most successful in dealing with guests, and why. Do some basic math, and try to figure out whether the hotel is profitable or not. Are there signs that the property is not being well maintained? Does management have good systems in place, and do things move smoothly or does every minor deviation turn into a big problem? Is the staff working as a team, pitching in to help one another without having to be asked first?

One of the things you'll learn quickly is that you need to be fluent in more than one language. In the overall European market, I would list English as the most important one, followed by Spanish.¹ To really set yourself apart from the crowd learn Russian and/or Mandarin.

So use your next job not only to gain more experience, but to speed up the process of learning a new language. My own experience backs up what the experts will tell you: nothing beats immersion. So, after about a year in that first job, choose your second job in a country whose language you want to learn. (I wanted to improve my English so I chose the Connaught hotel in London.) And if your first job was with an international chain, you might be able to pull some strings to get your next assignment. If not, rest assured that almost every position at every desirable property is listed on the Internet.

If you enjoyed that first job, with its frantic pace, odd hours and lousy pay, you probably have what it takes to succeed. Many, if not most, of your former fellow students will have dropped out by now. And, if you kept your eyes and ears open, you now know something about the industry. Some years ago, a retailer explained his philosophy of doing business: "It's better to make fast nickels than slow dimes." That also is the business model of many 3 and 4-star hotels in the world's major cities. They operate on lower margins but with higher occupancy rates. Seek employment in one of those, in a city that maximizes your chances to learn the local language and customs. Take language lessons, and stay at the front desk so you can keep learning about the inner workings of the hotel, and fine-tune your language skills. Once again, leave after about a year, even if you've fallen in love with London, New York or Sidney, or your manager begs you to stay. If you're focused on shaping a career, it's time to move on.

Now go to Spain or another Spanish-speaking country. And again, look for that fast-paced environment. By now it's become a habit: you work hard, observe, and learn. Learn about more than just how to run the hotel; learn about the local culture as well. Make friends with local co-workers and they will show you their business and social customs. Take language classes. Speaking fluent Spanish will give you a permanent edge over colleagues who merely speak English. It will also make relations with local people much easier. Stay for about a year at this job. By now you will be in a supervisory position at the desk and your pay will have improved.

¹ Get a head start by learning foreign phrases specific to the hotel industry from texts or programs like "International Foreign Language Guide for Hotel Employees Course," which comes with an old-fashioned cassette, or "Be Our Guest: Basic English for Hotel Staff," by Donald Adamson. For English speakers, the U.S. Foreign Service Institute offers free courses online: <http://www.fsi-language-courses.org/Content.php>

At this point you should have a good idea of what makes a hotel tick. It's time to move on and up. We'll be moving out to yet another cultural experience, and maybe our third language. And we'll move up by selecting a job in middle management.

One great thing about the hotel business is that you can get to the top no matter where you start or which department you may currently work in. Housekeepers can become managers of 5-star hotels.² Lateral moves are possible, as are promotions into different departments. See if you can move into sales, or become a cashier in the comptroller's department, or find something in food and beverages. To come back to my earlier theme: be the player; be proactive!

At this point you will need to be more selective than you were in your first three jobs. You should now know that there are differences in the way hotels are managed. You should want to be part of a winning team. Playing for an underperforming property would steer your career into a dead end. As a middle manager you will not have enough influence to turn things around, and even if you did outstanding work, your contributions would be drowned in a sea of mediocrity.

A well-managed property will exhibit certain characteristics. It will be clean and inviting and run by a great staff. It will have sales & marketing plans and budgets. It will train its people well and push decision-making authority as far down the ladder as possible.

After three years of in-the-trenches experience, and after learning two or three new languages, you won't want to waste your time working at an underperforming business. To develop your career you will want to bring your talents to winning teams that run successful properties. You will look forward to new challenges and as you meet them and provide value to all of those around you — your guests, your co-workers, your owners and everyone else in your ecosystem — your career will flourish.

² Read Naowarat Arunkong's remarkable story here:

<http://www.nationmultimedia.com/business/From-housekeeper-to-GM-30178025.html>

Play on!

Key aspects:

- Personal qualities needed for a hospitality career include an ability to get along with people, emotional stability, a business orientation and good keyboard and computer skills.
- Be active in your own career development. Be a learner: Start with a good foundation, become fluent in languages, study hotel operations, observe and learn from successful colleagues.
- Seek out tough assignments, challenge yourself, and grow your career. Never lose sight of your goals. Take charge.

If you have any questions or observations about this paper, or you wish to have some book recommendations, please contact me. phouniet@peterhouniet.com