



CAREER FOCUS

USING LANGUAGES IN TRAVEL, TOURISM, AND HOSPITALITY

EDITOR'S NOTE: In this issue of *The Language Educator*, we continue our series of articles on different career opportunities available to language professionals by looking at work in the field of hospitality.

BY PATRICIA KONING

Sandy McDowell is living proof that if you do what you love, the money does follow. In her case, what she loved was France and the money followed when she opened France Journeys, a specialty travel agency.

"My friends and family were always asking for advice on hotels, restaurants, and things to do in France," she explains. "So when I decided to change careers, travel was the obvious choice."

McDowell studied French in high school and majored in art history in college before embarking on a career in advertising and marketing. She traveled to France and Europe about once a year. Now, she travels to France two to three times a year, even leading tour groups.

"It's easy to sell something you love," she says. "I know parts of France better than my own hometown."

She uses her French on a daily basis to communicate with suppliers and partners in France. Her agency has three staff members in France and three stateside. Not being immersed, she admits, means her spoken French is not always perfect but she says that quite a bit of her work is done via e-mail.

"Just understanding the pleasantries and customs is very important," she says. "Knowing French and understanding French culture is a huge asset and I think it helps distinguish our agency."

France Journeys is directed at travelers who know they want to go to France and surrounding areas and are looking for a customized, unique experience. The agency only recommends hotels and inns with which it has personal experience. That expertise enables the agency to go well beyond booking travel to creating one-of-a-kind trips. McDowell is also president of the Specialty Travel Agents Association (STAA).

While the tourism industry has been hit by the recession—just like every other sector of the economy—McDowell believes the specialty travel market has fared better. France Journeys draws clients from across the country and world. "We're located in Michigan, but I

don't think we've had more than a handful of clients from this state this year," she says.

A GOOD FIT

In many ways, the tourism and hospitality industry is an ideal fit for people like McDowell, who love travel and other cultures. A career in hospitality provides many of the same experiences and opportunities that attract students to world languages—the chance to meet new people, explore the world, and learn about other cultures.

The hospitality industry covers a wide variety of employment opportunities at all levels—everything from restaurants to hotels to travel agents to resorts to senior communities falls under the hospitality umbrella. Hospitality is a \$4 billion industry by some estimates and the primary source of income for many countries.

It is also a growth industry. The Bureau of Labor Statistics, part of the U.S. Department of Labor, predicts that wage and salary employment in hotels and other accommodations will increase by 14% between 2006 and 2016, compared with 11% for all other industries. The same report finds that "growth of full-service hotels, casino hotels, and the small, but burgeoning, luxury hotel market that specializes in personal service will cause employment of lodging managers to grow much faster than the average."

Hotel and resort management is an enticing career for students of world languages. A hotel manager oversees all aspects of operations, from the front desk to the maintenance staff. In high-end hotels and resorts, an executive director oversees managers of different functions. Often, executive directors have worked their way through the ranks, many starting at the front desk.

"Knowledge of one or more foreign languages is a definite asset for anyone planning a career in hospitality," says Elizabeth Johnson, marketing manager for the American Hotel and Lodging Educational



France Journeys founder Sandy McDowell with a client on a shopping tour in Provence.

Institute. "Because guests at hotels and resorts come from all over the world, it is a plus to have people on staff at a hotel who can converse in their native language."

She adds that, for managers, being able to speak a foreign language can also come in handy when working with a multilingual, multicultural staff. Ed Rosheim, founder of Workplace Languages, has built a career out of facilitating communication between staff and management at restaurants and hotels. Workplace Languages provides workplace-specific language training in several professions, the largest of which is hospitality.

In most restaurants and hotels, the back-end staff such as housekeeping, maintenance, and food service is comprised of many non- or limited-English speakers. Rosheim has about 25 clients in the hospitality industry, many of which are well-known brands such as Papa John's, Outback Steakhouse, Marriott, and Starwood Resorts.

"When you are talking about communication, you are talking about the bottom line," he says. "If you can bridge that communication gap, you can develop rapport, and increase productivity and efficiency. I've seen so many people move up through the ranks because they speak Spanish or other languages."

As director of restaurants for the Marriott in downtown San Jose, CA, Adam Lawrence uses Spanish daily to facilitate communication with his staff. He estimates that half of his associates speak Spanish as their first language and another 20–25% communicate better in Spanish than in English.

"A big part of my day-to-day job is resolving problems," he says. "Being fluent in Spanish is a huge asset. Sometimes explaining the problem is the most difficult part."

Many universities are addressing this need in their hospitality management programs. Pennsylvania State University's School of Hospitality Management has a "Spanish for Hospitality" initiative, a joint program with the university's Spanish department.

"This program focuses on Spanish for hospitality employment situations. It is mostly verbal, and prepares students through on-campus

classes and a language immersion program in Puerto Rico for a future as hospitality managers and executives in which they have to deal with employees who speak Spanish as a first language," explains Hubert B. Van Hoof, director of the Penn State's School of Hospitality Management.

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, graduates of bachelor's and master's degree hospitality programs such as Penn State's are highly sought after by employers in this industry, because of their familiarity with technical issues and their ability to learn related skills quickly. Eventually, they may advance to a top management position in a hotel or a corporate management position in a large chain operation.

Beyond the degree, achieving success in the hospitality industry requires excellent interpersonal skills. Do you like organizing events, meeting new people, and ensuring that others have a great time? Then this might be the industry for you.

"If I sat in an office all day, I'd probably go crazy. The restaurant industry is very social and high-energy and I enjoy that," says Lawrence. "At the same time, it's very challenging. Everything you do is judged immediately by your guests, so there is no margin for error. But I relish that challenge."

The role of most hospitality professionals—hotel managers, event planners, tour guides, waiters—is to create an environment of leisure for clients. But the field also requires business acumen and organizational skills.

William Samenfink is dean of the School of Hospitality at Endicott College in Massachusetts and the president of the International Council on Hotel, Restaurant, and Institutional Education (CHRIE). Students in the Endicott School of Hospitality, he says, study subjects such as marketing, accounting, strategic management, and organizational behavior with the goal of developing transferable management skills.

"Many international general managers have a command of three or more languages," he says. "They may not be fluent, but they can greet a dignitary and make a toast in the mother tongue. It's very helpful and makes you much more viable in the marketplace. I tell my students that if they are fluent in another language, to list that front and center on their resume because it will set them apart from other applicants."

Hospitality students at Endicott College are strongly encouraged to study and work abroad as part of their education. More than half of the seniors, says Samenfink, have typically had one or more international experiences. "Employers look at those experiences favorably, plus we see so much growth with students when they return from abroad," he adds.

This is typical of university hospitality programs. Penn State has summer work-study programs in Switzerland, France, and Puerto Rico; spring break programs in Italy and Greece; and semester and year-long student exchange programs with the Chinese University of Hong Kong and Hotelschool Maastricht in the Netherlands. Future programs are being created in Europe, Asia, Australia, New Zealand, and South America.

In a multinational corporation, language skills can accelerate career mobility. Samenfink says that mobility makes the hospitality

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SO YOU WANT TO BECOME A . . .

Travel Agent. To become a travel agent, one can complete travel agent certification, typically a 6- to 12-week certificate course. Many community colleges, technical schools, and some universities offer programs that go beyond the basic certificate. For example, Moraine Valley Community College in Illinois offers a Travel-Tourism certificate, which can be completed in one year and prepares students for entry-level jobs, and a 2-year A.A.S. degree meant to prepare students for management and supervisory positions.

For a list of schools, try The American Society of Travel Agents' Education/Careers section on its website (www.asta.org/Education). Another source is The Travel Institute (www.thetravelinstitute.com).

Or, you can work in a travel agency for on-the-job experience. No specific training or certification is required to work as a travel agent. "Much can be learned by doing actual bookings with some help from a mentor," says McDowell. "On-the-job experience and first-hand travel experience is helpful."

A college degree is not required, but is preferred as the industry is using increasingly more computer technology. Independent travel agents, such as Sandy McDowell, are also small business owners and need to understand accounting, marketing, and other business skills. McDowell has found her background in advertising and marketing to be an asset when it comes to selling her agency's services.

To become a specialized travel agent, one needs expertise in a specific country, region, or type of travel, such as golf, ecotourism, or adventure. An agent with a geographic or cultural specialty should speak the language and travel frequently in that area. Specialty training is available through many foreign governments and tourism departments; McDowell participated in several courses on France early in her career and occasionally goes on localization tours sponsored by the French government. For more information, visit the Specialty Travel Agents Association (www.specialtytravelagents.com).

The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that, in 2008, the median annual salary for a travel agent was \$31,000 with top salaries around \$50,000.

Hotel Manager. According to Bobbi Barnes, the director of career services for the William F. Harrah College of Hotel Administration at University of Nevada-Las Vegas, recruiters in the hospitality industry look at three areas: education, including what type of degree, what school, and GPA; experience; and interpersonal skills.

"We always say the type of degree does not matter as much as having the degree," she says. "Not all positions require it, but not having a college degree can limit your ability for promotion down the line."



Hospitality students working at school restaurants. Top: students at Collins College in California. Right: students at Endicott College in Massachusetts.



Study in hospitality or business is preferred, but relevant experience can bridge the knowledge gap. Direct hospitality experience—such as working in a hotel, restaurant, or event center—is best, but anything that demonstrates excellent interpersonal skills can boost an applicant's resume. Languages, says Barnett, are always an asset and often a requirement, especially in places like Las Vegas that draw visitors from all over the world.

Hotel and restaurant chains tend to promote from within, so a career path for professionals with other backgrounds is to get a foot in the door with an entry-level position. Once in the industry, hard-working professionals can move up the corporate ladder by acquiring new skills and maximizing any unique knowledge—such as a second language.

The national median annual salary for a lodging manager in 2008 was \$45,000 with top earners making \$85,000 or more.

Restaurant Manager. With restaurants, experience usually trumps education. For higher-level management positions, a college degree with some management training is often preferred. Adam Lawrence manages four facilities for the San Jose Marriott: a fine-dining restaurant, upscale bar, coffee and gift shop, and room service, which is no small operation for a 506-room hotel.

Lawrence has a bachelor's degree in religious studies and 21 years of experience in the restaurant industry. He started as a waiter and bartender, moving around to different establishments and into positions of more responsibility. Nine years ago he became a manager and five years ago, a general manager. "Experience has really been the driver for every promotion I've gotten," he says. "There's really no substitute for working in the business."

In 2008, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics found that restaurant managers earn an average of \$46,000, with salaries over \$75,000 on the high end.



Collins College students in a hospitality course.

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industry an exciting place to be, especially for someone just starting out his or her career. “Your ability to be promoted really depends on you—how hard you work and what new skills you acquire,” he explains. “A multinational corporation often provides opportunities to work and live in many places in the world. It’s typically a good job market with lots of flexibility.”

THE POWER OF LANGUAGE

An excellent example of a multinational corporation is Club Med. “We have a 58-year history of hosting international guests and staffing our resorts with an international team,” says Chris Keeley, director of Human Resources and Recruitment for Club Med Resorts North America.

“Our ‘product’ relies on the ability to communicate with our guests. While most positions don’t require knowledge of multiple languages, such skills give applicants an advantage and open doors of opportunity. We rotate staff and management between our resorts, so the more languages one speaks, the more opportunities for travel and advancement.”

Two examples of entry-level positions at Club Med are front desk and childcare. For the front desk, Keeley says Club Med typically recruits directly from hospitality management schools and looks for applicants with hotel and reception experience. Positions such as these that interact with guests are called Gracious Organizers, or G.O.s. Behind-the-scenes employees are called Gracious Employees.

“If you are working at the front desk in one of our resorts, you may be processing 100 guests in any given day. Probably close to half of those guests don’t speak English as a first language, so you can see how advantageous it is to speak a second language. The inability to communicate translates quickly into client dissatisfaction.”

Childcare workers are even more prominent at Club Med and are a centerpiece of the corporation’s family resorts. If half of the guests coming through the front desk do not speak English, then half the children in the childcare program also are non-English speakers. Keeley says Club Med hires many former teachers and coaches into the childcare and sports programs.

THE CASE FOR COLLEGE

Lorena Galvez attended the Collins College of Hospitality Management at California State Polytechnic University, Pomona, to pursue a career in event planning. “The program was very hands-on. We didn’t spend much time in a classroom, looking at books and talking about abstract ideas,” she says. “Instead we were out in the field experiencing things for ourselves.”

Her favorite class was a year-long restaurant course. The first quarter was devoted to learning to cook in large quantities, the second to marketing and advertising, and the third to restaurant management. The class was divided into 10 teams, each of which managed the Restaurant at Kellogg Ranch. The restaurant is entirely student-run and overseen by a faculty team. The goal is for students to gain experience in providing excellent guest service and preparing fresh, quality food while putting hospitality management theory to practical use.

Members of the teams each played a typical role in restaurant management—beverage manager, kitchen manager, and production manager. Those that were not managing the restaurant worked in all other aspects from busboy to bartender.

“It gave me a really good understanding of what different employees do and how I would like to be treated,” she says. “Beyond managing the restaurant, the Collins College opened my eyes to the entire hospitality industry.”

Galvez is now assistant manager of a sports bar at the Pomona Fairplex, the home of the Los Angeles County Fair. The facility is used year-round to host a variety of educational, commercial, and entertainment such as trade and consumer shows, conventions, and sporting events.

A native Spanish speaker, Galvez uses both English and Spanish on the job daily. “Much of my staff is more comfortable speaking in Spanish than English, so I often give instructions or provide training in Spanish. Often, they will approach for help with expressing an idea or concern in English,” she says.

While she intends to eventually move into event planning, she says restaurant management is giving her great, hands-on experience for that field. “I really enjoy the atmosphere of teamwork,” she says. “As a sports bar, we get a wide range of people—retirees who come to watch horse racing during the day and a younger crowd to watch football or basketball in the evening.”

FOR MORE INFORMATION

American Hotel and Lodging Association (AHLA)
www.ahla.com

American Hotel and Lodging Educational Institute
 (AH&LA-EI)
www.ei-ahla.org

The American Society of Travel Agents
www.asta.org

Collins College of Hospitality Management,
 Cal Poly Pomona
www.csupomona.edu/~collins

Club Med Jobs
www.clubmedjobs.com

Endicott College School of Hospitality Management
www.endicott.edu/servlet/RetrievePage?site=endicott&page=HospTourism

France Journeys
www.francejourneys.com

International Council on Hotel, Restaurant,
 and Institutional Education (CHRIE)
chrie.org

Moraine Valley Community College Travel/Tourism
 Certificate
www.morainevalley.edu/programs/general/1289.htm

Penn State University School of Hospitality Management
www.hhdev.psu.edu/shm

The Travel Institute
www.thetravelinstitute.com

Specialty Travel Agents Association
www.specialtytravelagents.com

U.S. Travel Association (USTA)
www.tia.org

William F. Harrah College of Hotel Administration
 at University of Nevada-Las Vegas
hotel.unlv.edu

Workplace Languages
www.workplacelanguages.com



A childcare worker at Club Med.

In hiring, the company looks for candidates that will fit into the Club Med lifestyle. “We’re looking for the applicant who loves to interact with people, along with skills relevant to the particular position,” he says. “In reviewing a candidate’s background, we look for a profile of someone who loves to work with people, someone who is open-minded, fun, and caring.”

Club Med screens candidates according to languages spoken, with French being the most important since Club Med is headquartered in France. Spanish, because of the corporation’s presence in Mexico and the Caribbean, is the next most preferred language.

Club Med’s G.O.s live in the resort and interact with guests in all capacities, sharing meals, entertainment, and social activities. The international environment of the resorts, says Keeley, makes them natural language classrooms.

“When you are working, participating, and exchanging with staff and guests from all over the world, you pick up languages,” he explains. “Many of our G.O.s pick up second and third languages informally.”

Club Med has Rosetta Stone software available for the employees to develop language skills. Keeley adds that in many villages, bilingual G.O.s with teaching backgrounds set up informal classes. And he should know—he learned Spanish and Japanese through the “language lab” at Club Med.

“We say that it is the best school someone will pay you to attend, with incredible opportunities to learn languages and other cultures and travel the world,” says Keeley. In addition to languages, G.O.s have the opportunity to learn any skill and specialty offered at their village—such as scuba diving, tennis, and sailing. Club Med also offers formal training through its Club Med School and Club Med University programs.

Patricia Koning is a freelance writer and regular contributor to The Language Educator based in Livermore, California. She covers education for the Livermore Independent and has written for numerous local publications on the wine industry, small business, and lifestyle topics.