

These Days a Good Butler is Hard to Find

By Ted Gregory
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This crisis might bring scoffs of mock sympathy from commoners. But it is causing anxiety from estates in the Hamptons to the ocean-side mansions of Malibu.

There's a butler shortage.

"If we doubled the number of butlers, they wouldn't be without work," said Charles MacPherson, vice chairman of the International Guild of Professional Butlers and president of a top household consulting company who also is an instructor at International Butler Academy in the Netherlands.

Mary Louise Starkey, founder and president of Starkey International Institute for Household Management, said the worldwide demand for butlers or household managers ~ the more contemporary expression for the job ~ is in the millions.

"I think the industry is 2 million people deep," Starkey said. "If my little company always has 45-50 clients waiting and I only educate 100 students a year, it's the tip of the iceberg."

At Professional Domestic Services & Institute, a household services school near Columbus, Ohio, owner Carol Scudere has been tracking her placement of students since about 2004. All but three of 135 graduates got jobs.

"I think it's definitely going to continue for as long as I'm around," Scudere said of the shortage. "Houses are getting bigger every year, and it takes qualified people to run them."

The labor crunch comes as no surprise to Debbie Bennett, 47, of Prospect Heights, who has been a household manager or personal assistant since 1996.

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"I'm really not surprised because I do think that it requires some personality and skill sets that are difficult to find in one individual," said Bennett, who left a high school teaching job to become a household manager. "You have to be somebody who doesn't get stressed out at crisis situations, and you have to be able to keep everybody around you calm."

At the same time, Bennett said, a household manager must be detail-oriented, a perfectionist and a motivator. Knowing how to carve a standing rib roast comes in handy, too.

"It's a complicated job," she said. "You're a manager. You're a supplier. You're paying their bills. It is a tremendous learning experience."

Estelle Walgreen of Lake Forest searched for months to find her household manager, Christine Lovely, three years ago and counts herself among the fortunate. Walgreen frets that someone might steal Lovely, who holds an economics degree from Georgia Tech.



"She's incredible," Walgreen said. "It is very difficult because the responsibilities can be vast and varied, depending on the household. And there are confidentiality issues."

In the 1970s and early '80s, "butling" was an antiquated and dying profession, MacPherson said.

Then came the explosive, international stampede of capitalism. This is the age of the almost runaway creation of multimillionaires and billionaires, or "billies" as Forbes calls them, particularly in Asia and Russia. In 1987, the first year the magazine began tracking billies, it found about 140 worldwide. This year, Forbes' annual list of billionaires totaled nearly 1,000.

As those numbers grew, so did the size and number of their houses, which makes it increasingly complicated for the ultra-rich to manage their lives.

The new billies "now want to start living as billionaires," MacPherson said.

But, "as that wealth increased so drastically, there weren't that many butlers in the ranks," he added.

The shortage has led to nightmare scenarios that continue today, experts said. Typical is when a nouveau riche individual hires his or her pool boy to be butler or household manager, MacPherson said. Soon, that loyal but ill-prepared employee is overwhelmed by the job.

"You wouldn't give millions of dollars to someone who wasn't an accountant," MacPherson said. "So, why would you do that with a house manager?"

Starkey, MacPherson, Scudere and others are attempting to standardize and professionalize the job with rigorous core classes, software, books, conferences, newsletters, even a reality TV butler competition.

But David Gonzalez, owner of Estatejobs.com, an online job board for domestic occupations, said the growing numbers of prospective employers, their precise demands of clients and the increasing complexities of the job make household manager a

tough position to fill.

"Employers are being very selective on a lot of little criteria," Gonzalez said. "It's almost like they're recruiting for a role in Hollywood. We may have in many cases two or three thousand candidates for that category and feel we don't have the right fit. It can be that unique."

Nearly everyone in the business will concede that being a butler or household or estate manager in the new millennium is a great deal more complicated than answering the door in a slightly snooty manner and sniping at housekeepers.

Apart from knowing how to rotate linens, they must deal with builders, electricians, plumbers and gardeners. They must be able to handle the household finances, understand how the home theater and sound system work, coordinate lavish dinner parties and informal family suppers. On top of all that, they must be computer and Internet savvy. Often, they must be multilingual.

"You're going into a place where there's never a dull moment," said Lovely, 38, of Chicago. "You've got to have strong intellect, and you've also got to have a strong work ethic. There's something appealing in knowing that I'm it, and I really like being able to take a project from start to finish."

Household manager also can be one plush gig, a chance to sample an upper-crust lifestyle without all the burdens that come with 14 bathrooms in one home, a yacht moored in Palm Beach and a Gulfstream in the hangar.

The typical starting salary is about \$60,000 a year, with multiple weeks of vacation and medical benefits. Housing and a car may be part of the package. The best in the business can earn almost \$200,000, and household manager insiders say one of the highest paid butlers in the U.S. earns \$1.5 million a year. Browsing online want ads for household managers can be a bit like paging through Conde Nast magazine.

"Family seeks mature hands on house manager/personal assistant for their primary residence in St. Maarten as well as to travel with them to their



other residences in Vegas, Turkey, and Bella Russe," one ad requests. "Guest cottage accommodations provided on property. Competitive salary and medical benefits."

Those cries for help are encouraging for Celeste Mathieus of Racine, Wis., who left a career as an executive assistant about two years ago to work as a household manager for a family living in a 22,000 square-foot mansion with 11 bathrooms, six nannies, four housekeepers and Lake Michigan nearby.

"I think the thing that I enjoy most about it is the ability to develop a service heart," Mathieus said. "The ability to understand the principal's lifestyle, to be allowed to take care of these people, to free up their lives to spend quality time with their families."

She said she enjoyed the work so much that she enrolled in Starkey's Household Management Program to hone her skills and graduated a few weeks ago. Now, Mathieus is choosing where she wants to go next, while taking her Harley for long rides.

"I don't think that people know that this is out there," she said about the profession. "It's not something that you read about every day. It's certainly not something that you would learn at the local college or university."



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