

NOW HIRING

THERE'S NO JOB LIKE IT. SO WHY DO SKI RESORTS HAVE SUCH A TOUGH TIME FINDING AND KEEPING GOOD HELP?

By Ian Merringer
Photography by Henry Georgi



I DON'T REMEMBER MUCH ABOUT THE "INTERVIEW."

It might have been a case of nerves. Job interviews don't often make me nervous, but this was different. I was trying to get a job at a *ski resort*. I figured my chances were slim. Surely there could be no tighter job market than a ski town crawling with independent but less-than-wealthy ski bums.

What I do remember were some questions about past work experience and my availability over the course of the winter. There was some threatening talk about an exam I would have to pass if I were ever considered. At the end, I offered my temporary phone number and the lift supervisor told me she'd call if there was some sort of staff exodus. It seemed the best I could hope for was a bad snow year.

I wrung my soon-to-be-dishwashing hands as I walked out of the office and into the locker room where the chosen people of ski resort employment were hanging up their staff jackets. That evening at home I ran through all



the ways I could make money in that town for a few months if not at the hill.

I was soon in bed.

The phone woke me early the next morning.

Despite the hour, the voice on the other end of the line was bright and hopeful, but there was no mistaking an underlying desperation.

"Hi, we were wondering if you could come in to work?"

I got to the hill as fast as my thumb could procure me a ride and reported for duty at the designated chairlift where I found the supervisor filling in for me.

The training went something like this. "This is the stop button. This is go. Before you start it up, beep twice and the liftee up top will answer. Don't hit anyone with the chair and if you need something, the phone's over there."

And so I started work, expertly conveying small and trusting children up

through the thin air on moving heavy machinery. My expertise, well, confidence anyway, increased with every passing chair and at mid-morning when I transferred to the top to man the unloading station I was feeling like an old hand. The minutes of blood, sweat and tears were worth it. I had climbed my way to the top of the ski resort staff pyramid. I was a liftee!

I leaned back against the shack, arms folded in self-satisfaction. I felt something give against my back as a mournful groaning sound emanated from the bullwheel house above my head. I looked behind me to see a depressed emergency stop button. In front of me a hundred jolted skiers were swinging in their chairs, and above me a stack of power switches and controls that might as well have been the control centre for the Springfield Nuclear Power Station needed resetting.

It would have been easy to get down on myself for this unscheduled testing of the chairlift's safety systems (it stopped with impressive haste, by the way). But as I climbed the ladder into the bullwheel house, gripping the chairlift manual in my teeth, I decided there was something bigger going on here. There was something askew in the supply and demand balance of ski town labour markets.

I had always taken it as a matter of common sense that ski bum jobs would be hard to come by. After all, they offer the holder a season's worth of skiing and a rare way to make a living, or some semblance of one, up the long winding roads where most mountains happen to be. But it turns out the meager talent pool that led to my on-the-job-training is a common affliction for Canadian ski resorts.

"We have some difficulties," admits Jay Hayashi, general manager of Big White, when asked about the autumnal ritual of filling the resort's 650 seasonal positions in the lift, food and beverage, rental and guest services areas. With a 75 per cent employee-turnover rate from year to year, Big White can draw only about half of its employees from the Okanagan region. A large portion of the rest come from Down Under.

"The Visa-exchange program with [Commonwealth countries like] Australia is absolutely critical to us," says Hayashi, referring to the program that allows qualified ski workers to move back and forth between seasons and countries, exempt from the normal bureaucratic entanglements. "Without that program we wouldn't be able to operate."

Big White goes so far as to attend job fairs in Australia to attract the oh-so-familiar accents, luring them across the Pacific with tales of boundless Canadian snowfields and hot tubs. It's an added expense for the HR department, but a necessary way of deepening the pool of potential employees.

And while the bulk of applicants are young and excited (trainable and motivated in employer-speak), employers are obviously interested in culling the lower echelon, a task made considerably harder when the ratio of applicants to available jobs approaches one-to-one and the hiring is done a scant few weeks before opening day.

"We have to consider candidates that other employers wouldn't look at," says Hayashi of the less-desirable prospects drawn to the seasonal, modestly paying work.

The result of having to pick from a shallow pool of workers, many of whom are moving away from home for the first time, is "lots of little dramas" and an attrition rate of 30 per cent. The bulk of that changeover comes at the end of January, when the more transient of the employees get itchy feet. Fortunately, Hayashi says that exodus is balanced by an influx of fresh faces coinciding with the end of school semesters in Canada and Australia.

While it's a happy coincidence that there always seems to be just enough immigrants to replace the migrants, it does put pressure on the staff training program of the resorts. "We have the equivalent of a 747 loaded on the chairs," says Hayashi. "We have to make sure our training programs are efficient."

The challenges of working with transients (an official tourism HR term) is even more apparent at Panorama. Though there's a local population base of

3,000 in Invermere, Rusty Noble, the resort's director of people, points out that "those people already have jobs." To fill the 200 yearly vacancies in their sprawling operations, Panorama attends job fairs from Saskatoon to Barrie, Ontario. The numbers always add up, often just before opening day, but the drawbacks of relying on travelling young people—often the only people willing to work on a seasonal basis—are quickly revealed. They stand in stark contrast to the prairie farmers who return year after year to operate the grooming machines.

"There are challenges when you get young people living away from home for the first time, living together with people they don't know and trying to learn personal finances," says Noble. "People just take off when they've had enough. Sometimes they don't even tell you they're leaving."

This dearth of prime ski bum candidates has turned the normal employer/employee relationship on its head. "We need to market ourselves to employees as much as to customers now," according to Anne Pidgeon of Whitewater Resort near Nelson, B.C., who says competition between resorts is getting tougher all the time. "Employees are interviewing us as much as we're interviewing them."

So what gives? Why are these fantastic places to live, work, ski and pursue the highest form of existence, that of the ski bum, beset by such labour shortages? Pidgeon points to a multi-faceted draining of the labour pool. "It's bound to get tougher as resorts expand. Every time Big White, for instance, invests another \$20 million, they need the employees to support that," she reasons.

And while more and larger resorts are taking more out of the labour pool, the inflow might be drying up at the same time. It falls short of a demo-economic analysis, but Pidgeon points to a perceived ratcheting up of the pressures on young people to go into other fields such as the high-tech sector or the trades, pursuits seen as more career-oriented.

Which could be a problem looking six years down the line to Whistler 2010. A new government initiative aimed at increasing the ranks of tourism workers is under development (www.go2hr.ca). It's good news, but as an indication of the work that lies ahead, it's been projected that there is currently a shortfall of 84,000 tourism workers below what will be needed to host the Olympics.

And as laudable as the government initiative may be, the road that resorts are trying to entice people up is only getting steeper. Pidgeon points out that as the litigious and technological strains of our society progress, finding people to load chairs and even make change at a cafeteria is no longer just a matter of bringing people in off the street.

"It's not enough to just hire friendly and intelligent people anymore," she says. "Increasingly they need to be skilled in computers to be cashiers, and a standardized certification system for lift operators is coming down the pipes."

In case anyone was wondering, I did end up taking my lift exam, and I did pass. And so I spent two winters at the resort that has remained nameless out of gratitude for giving me the perfect job—a season's pass and union wages for loading chairs one day a week.

But if the future of a four-month gig as a liftee involves going through a lengthy and expensive certification process, then less starry-eyed would-be employees could well turn, in even greater numbers, to the seductive arms of the unmentioned, but undeniably darkest enemies of seasonal employers: pogy and the dole. ❧

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