

Climbing The Hospitality Career Ladder: Career Guidance Insights From Social Networking Profiles

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Abstract

In this paper, I examined an alternative source of information for current students (as well as potential students and their parents) interested in facts about careers in the hospitality industry. Textbooks and corporate websites provide simplified and perhaps misleading information on career paths and progress. Empirical research on key roles is limited in its focus, and either flawed or sparse and dated. I used the publicly accessible social networking profiles of 13 male and one female Mainland Chinese international hotel food and beverage directors to illustrate different career patterns in the lodging industry to three groups of students. I identified limitations of the approach I used. I drew implications for practice for faculty members tasked with providing continuing career counselling to students.

Keywords: Hospitality careers; career insights; career guidance; social networking profiles

The objective of the project I reported there was to examine a way to provide current undergraduate students (as well as potential students and their parents) in an English-medium degree program in Taiwan with information grounded on identifiable persons and useful in forming realistic expectations about careers in hospitality management, and specifically in lodging management.

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Background

Perennially, students raise questions during coursework about career prospects and opportunities in the hospitality industry, particularly when a textbook refers to career paths, tracks, or ladders. Similar questions also surface from potential students interested in degree programs in hospitality management, as well as from their parents.

The information presented in standard textbooks through vignettes, diagrams and descriptions about career ladders, paths, and progress is simplified and, thus, confusing and misleading, with little real insight into how individuals progress within the competitive hierarchy – or career ladder – of the industry. In hospitality management, for example, Walker (2013) presents career ladders in lodging management, food and beverage (or F&B) management, and rooms division management in mid-sized and large hotels, and a career ladder for restaurant management. All Walker's career ladders begin "(during college)" (*sic*) (2013, p. 20 – 21). The highest position he cites in lodging management is general manager; the highest position in restaurant management is regional manager; but the two other career ladders terminate at divisional director. In these career ladders, these positions appear to be terminal appointments.

In terms of careers specifically in lodging management, Stutts (1999) presents what he describes as "an example of a career path that is typical of many lodging operations" (p. 25). His table derives from a chapter by Riegel (1995). It shows a steady vertical climb up the corporate career ladder, beginning as a management trainee (i.e., after graduation). After one year, an employee is an assistant outlet manager or guest services manager. After four years, he or she is an outlet manager or assistant front office manager and, after five years, F&B manager or rooms division manager, with some in-between experience as front office manager or assistant F&B manager. After ten years, the employee is director of operations and, after 15 years, a general manager.

Stutts and Wortman (2006, p. 49), nevertheless, state, "If you complete your course of study and graduate with a bachelor of science degree in hotel management, most likely you will enter the business at the managerial level." It is not clear whether graduates enter as a managerial trainee or at some other level, though. Later they confirm that, In a full-service hotel or lodging business, the movement from entry-level position to general manager might encompass 15 years.

Career advancement in a limited-service hotel or lodging business can occur more rapidly. A career in a limited-service hotel or lodging establishment might commence at the assistant general manager level, with movement to general manager within three years and to district or regional manager within five to eight years. This accelerated pace is due in large part to the more restricted range of services the manager must master before advancing (Stutts & Wortman, 2006, p. 50).

Thus, publications by Stutts in fact refer not to one typical career ladder but to two (i.e., one for employees in full-service hotels and one for those working in limited-service hotels) with no suggestion that people can transfer from one ladder to another, and which cover different lengths of time needed to reach the general manager position or higher.

Hayes, Ninemeier, and Miller (2012) define a career ladder in "lodging language" (p. 101) as "A plan that details successively more responsible positions within an organization or an industry. Career ladders allow one to plan and schedule developmental activities necessary to assume more responsible positions" (p. 101). They describe a hotel's organizational chart as "a simple career ladder" that "suggests successively more responsible positions in the property" (p. 101). Hayes et al. (2012) imply, nevertheless, that *only* staff working for limited-service hotels transfer between departments to gain a fuller understanding of a hotel's entire operations. Their language (i.e., repeated use of "plan") also suggests that career progress and managerial advancement is under the individual's control rather than being frequently unplanned and unsystematic (Deery, 1999), or the result of happenstance (see, e.g., Lock, 2004; Walmsley, Jameson, & Thomas, 2007).

Walker (2013), though, in his textbook discussion of career paths in hospitality management does note:

A career path does not always go in a straight line, as sometimes described in a career ladder... We may begin in one area and later find another that is more attractive. Opportunities come our way and we need to be prepared to take advantage of them" (p. 37).

His description of career progress in full-service hotels sharply contrasts with that of Stutts and Wortman (2006):

The path to general manager in a hotel may go through food and beverage, rooms division, marketing, human resources, or finance and accounting, or, more likely, a combination of these, because it is better to have experience in several areas (cross-training)" (Walker, 2013, p. 37).

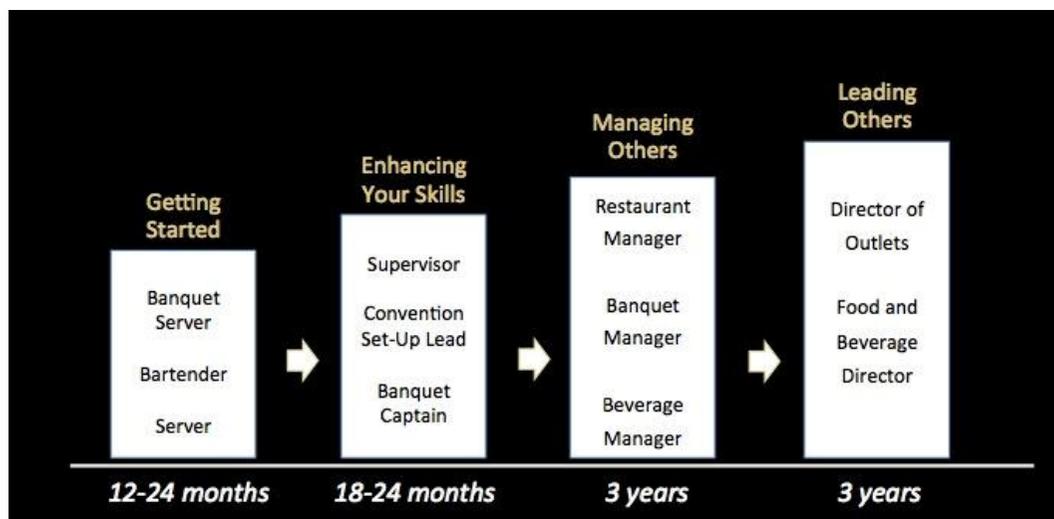
Despite Hayes et al.'s (2012) statement that a career ladder's successively more responsible positions can be within either an organization or an industry, implicit in the descriptions and diagrams is the notion that hospitality and lodging management careers take place within a single organization or corporation. Guerrier (1987), Guerrier and Lockwood (1989), and Riley and Turam (1989) demonstrate how hotel managers' careers develop through a succession of moves between functions and units, either within the same company or between hotel companies (but rarely across industry sector or industry boundaries). Textbook descriptions of career progress largely ignore this fact.

Textbook vignettes and stories about individuals provide some information but, because the United States publishes the majority of English-language textbooks and they feature American examples, their relevance is not immediately apparent to students of other nationalities and in other countries. Typical examples of these vignettes are the word portrait of Conrad Hilton given by, e.g., Stutts and Wortman (2006), and the business and professional profiles given by Chon and Maier (2010). Parenthetically, it is interesting to note that even foreign-language translations of American-published textbooks refer mainly to icons of American hospitality management, e.g., the Brazilian, Portuguese-language, version of Chon and Sparrowe (2003). The use of American textbooks showing American career path patterns perhaps unintentionally presents these patterns as the norm.

Going outside textbooks to corporate websites does not yield better information on which to advise students on career choices. Exhibit I below is an example of food and beverage division careers used by Hyatt Hotels in recruiting. The corporation's comment about this diagram is, "While there are many different paths and the time it takes to progress can depend on your ability to relocate for new positions the graph below reflects a typical career path within the Food and Beverage function." Despite the disclaimer noted in this sentence, a reasonable inference from the Hyatt Hotels graph, though, is that a Hyatt employee can climb the ladder from server to F&B director in not more than ten years.

A second reasonable inference is that students (and their parents) may view the diagram as prescriptive rather than descriptive so that, if future career progression does not match that in the diagram, the individual may become discouraged.

Exhibit 1: Food & Beverage Career Path from Hyatt Hotels



Source: Hyatt Hotels at <http://foodandbeverage.hyatt.jobs/>

Other major hotel brand sites give even less information on “careers,” with some giving statements about the qualities needed of positions within that organization, or job descriptions, entry level positions, and “additional roles” into which “Associates can grow” (e.g., Starwood Hotels and Resorts, 2014), and others giving only job descriptions under the generic title of career opportunities (e.g., Red Roof Inn, n.d.).

Sometimes educational organizations simplify information to the point that it is just plain confusing. The American Hotel and Lodging Educational Institute (AHLEI, n.d.) provides a “typical hospitality career ladder” (*sic*) (which carries the annotation “Climb the Ladder to Success”) that is incomprehensible as a “career ladder” in terms of Hayes et al.’s (2012) definition noted above. It is understandable as a “career ladder” if one focuses only on the successively higher salaries associated with particular positions on the ladder rather than on the positions themselves within a lodging management hierarchy.

Moreover, information such as that concerning salaries for particular levels in the management hierarchy could become confusing with the elapse of time and when it is taken out of national context.

Seeking help by referring to contemporary empirical research on career paths in hospitality management is not always helpful. There is a vast amount of empirical research on the hotel managers' career path but, as Kim, Chun, & Petrick (2009) note, it suffers from many flaws and it does not really cover careers paths outside Anglophone countries. Cross-national research, though, does show reveals significant differences in managerial progression among hotel managers working in international hotel chains in Asia and Europe (Garavan, O'Brien, & O'Hanlon, 2006).

Food and beverage (F&B) operations experience is perhaps the most established path to becoming a hotel general manager in both East and West (see, e.g., Guerrier, 1987; Harper, Brown, & Irvine, 2005; Kim et al., 2009; Ladkin, 2000, 2002; Nebel, Lee, & Vidakovic, 1995; Ruddy, 1989; Williams & Hunter, 1992). Empirical research on career paths within the F&B sector is curiously "quite sparse" (Nebel, Braunlich, and Zhang, 1994, p. 3), dated, limited in its focus, and based on anonymous respondents to a survey questionnaire. The only major empirical study on F&B directors' career paths – that by Nebel et al. (1994) – is two decades old, and focused only on F&B directors' careers in American luxury hotels.

The contemporary relevance as career guidance to current – and future and non-Anglophone – undergraduates in hospitality management of published research on hotel manager and F&B director career paths is not clear.

Given the situation described above, it is not surprising that researchers have discovered that students in many countries hold unrealistic expectations about responsibilities, salaries, skills, and career progress in hospitality and lodging management (see e.g., Hamm, 2009; Kent, 1978; Kim, Lee & Hallab, 2005; Purcell & Quinn, 1996; Ramakrishna & Nebel, 1996).

The Asian hospitality industry is growing rapidly (Harrison, Chang, Gauthier, Joerchel, Nevarez, & Wang, 2005; Jogaratnam & Tse, 2004; Lee, Khan, & Ko, 2008; Smith & Siguaw, 2010). Working environments in the Asian hospitality industry are different from those in other regions (see, e.g., Hoare & Butcher, 2007; Mwaura, Sutton, & Roberts, 1998).

Current and potential students in Asia (and their parents) need and expect realistic examples of career progression from closer to home than the United Kingdom, United States, or Australia. As Kent (1978) wrote, academics can improve graduate expectations “by improving our counselling technique and by collecting sounder information on which to base that counselling” (p. 17).

Method

Kent (1978) suggested that industry executive profiles are invaluable in career counselling as they lead to better informed and more realistic students, better counselling by faculty, and a reduction of the disillusionment that arises from overblown employment expectations. (He suggested also that they could lead to enlightenment among industry leaders).

Social networking sites provide easily accessible sources of industry executive profiles, and using social networking sites such as LinkedIn (Adams, 2013) to research careers is widely recommended for graduating students. Employers increasingly are using social networks to make hiring decisions, and researchers are using social networking sites to track career paths (see, e.g., Case, Gardiner, Rutner, & Dyer, 2012).

To use social networking sites to provide career insights for freshman and sophomore students, as well as for a senior class, in AY 2012-2013 I used information derived from the social networking site LinkedIn to examine career path patterns in terms of entry-level jobs, subsequent career path progress, and the career path movement of these hospitality management professionals.

The selected profiles had to meet two specific criteria. First, that they detailed the individual industry executive’s career positions from their first job to the date on which I collected them. The second criterion was that they were appropriate to most of the department’s student body, i.e., preferably Taiwanese or, failing that, other Chinese. I did not consider using the profiles of expatriates working in Asia, despite the number of non-Taiwanese students in the Department’s program.

I identified F&B directors as the project's default choice for three specific reasons. The first was the reported importance of experience in the F&B role and function in the career progress of hotel managers (see, e.g., Harper et al., 2005; Kim et al., 2009; Ladkin & Juwaheer, 2000; Nebel et al., 1994; Ruddy, 1989). The second was because they feature in many of the textbook and corporate examples cited above. The third was because many students had either fulltime or part time work experience in F&B operations in nearby hotels and restaurants, or in family businesses, and it was the hotel operation with which they were most familiar and to which they could relate.

As I was unable to identify a sufficient number of English-language profiles for hotel F&B directors in Taiwan, I gathered the professional profiles of Mainland Chinese F&B directors available in English on LinkedIn on October 6th and 7th, 2012 that met the first criterion. Collecting information on the same date allowed comparability in terms of the length of time that informants had held their current position.

To deal with ethical and legal concerns about using personal information for teaching and career guidance purposes (see, e.g., Moreno, Goni, Moreno, & Diekma, 2013), I utilized only profiles that were publicly available, i.e., access to them did not require a membership account with LinkedIn and access to confidential information.

The target student population of this career guidance exercise comprised students enrolled in I-Shou University's (ISU) International College English-medium Bachelor of Science in International Tourism and Hospitality Management degree program. I used three groups of students; (1) freshmen students in a compulsory *Introduction to Hospitality Industry* class; (2) sophomore students in an elective *Lodging Management* course; and (3) a cohort of senior students who were developing their own social networking profiles as a class assignment (in preparation for future job hunting). I distributed copies of the identified profiles in class and asked students to analyse them in terms of selected categories of career progression information.

Results

Fourteen publicly available profiles met the two specified criteria, 13 belonging to male F&B directors, and one to a female F&B director. At the time of the project, 13 of the 14 F&B directors worked for hotel brands managed by different international hotel chains, while the female F&B director worked for a Chinese luxury resort hotel.

The dates at which this group of F&B directors entered the hospitality industry range from 1983 (for the trainee chef) to 2005. Profiles of 12 F&B directors showed that their earliest training overlapped with reported working appointments, with no clear transition from education to first employment, and thus that their career in hospitality in fact began before college or university. During this overlapping period, however, only three noted that they were trainees or interns during this time, and a fourth's appointment as "restaurant manager" seems to have been a senior year internship.

In terms of their educational background, 11 of the male F&B directors reported that they attended university or tourism schools or colleges in Mainland China; one had no formal academic qualifications at all, and last received his hotel management education in Switzerland. One of the male F&B directors had completed further studies in Britain and Switzerland, and the F&B director with no formal academic qualifications undertook English-language training in Australia. The female F&B director, however, received her initial hotel training in London and later earned an Executive MBA in Switzerland.

Not all of the F&B directors entered the industry with training in hospitality management or culinary arts. Two graduated with diplomas in English and another in Japanese before completing a degree in tourism management in Britain. Among the others, one first trained in accounting and auditing; one did not state his degree field at all; and the last began his career as a trainee chef. Three also reported undertaking in-service professional development programs.

First job titles, whether or not these overlapped with formal education as noted above, covered a range of responsibilities. The F&B directors first reported assignments were as: "assistant manager (with a range of responsibilities);" "assistant restaurant manager;" "hotel management trainee;" "F&B manager;" "F&B management trainee;" "in-room dining supervisor;" "beverage manager;" "assistant Chinese restaurant manager;" "French restaurant cook;" "coffee shop and lobby bar manager;" "ADD (All day dining) manager;" "Western operations manager;" and "intern/restaurant waiter/bartender." This last F&B director's first reported job after graduation was as "tour group organizer" for China Travel Service, though. This latter instance was the only instance of any of the F&B directors' profiles showing any experience outside either the hospitality industry or the F&B track.

For four of the F&B directors, their present appointment was also their first at this level. The average number of appointments held as F&B director (including the present one) was 2.14, ranging from one to four. The average number of overall career appointments so far, including their present one and those that overlapped with training, was 7.7, with a range of from five to 15 appointments. The average length of tenure in these appointments (including present appointment) was 26 months. The period of shortest tenure of any appointment (including the present one) was one month, and the period of longest tenure (again including the present assignment) was 12 years and 9 months.

Among the 10 F&B directors who had two or more appointments at this level, eight of the group had held two or more consecutive appointments as F&B director. The career pattern of the ninth showed that at one stage in his career, he alternated between being an executive chef and an F&B director, and the tenth spent time between F&B director appointments as a pre-opening hotel consultant. The profiles also demonstrated office succession, with one F&B director succeeding another after a four-month period when someone else held the post.

The career positions also demonstrated lateral as well as vertical shifts in responsibility. The career pattern of one F&B director showed a lateral move during his career into three consecutive appointments as an F&B trainer/program instructor/training manager for a total of 4 years and 4 months. The career of another showed that his substantive position immediately before his current F&B director's appointment was combined with a year-long teaching post as a F&B module guest lecturer a Swiss hospitality college affiliate in Shanghai.

At the same time, the profiles indicate how a lodging industry career path in F&B management can be combined with work outside hotels but still within the hospitality industry, i.e., across industry sector boundaries. One career profile showed a period of 24 months as general manager of a private club owned by a property development group. A second (belonging to the F&B director who had also been a training manager and program instructor) showed a period of 45 months as assistant F&B manager for the Beijing Hong Kong Jockey Club. A third (belonging to the F&B director who began his career as a trainee chef) displayed the most interesting career pattern. This male F&B director combined periods working within hotels in Mainland China with periods working as chef or F&B director in clubs in Sydney, Australia (for a total of 64 months), and a period as executive chef for 27 months for a major restaurant chain.

A fourth spent nine months as F&B manager at the China National Convention Centre and Hotel and catering manager at the Main Press Centre at the 2008 Beijing Olympics.

Other information in these profiles further illustrated the difference between those who followed organizational careers and those who followed occupational ones (see Brown, 1982). Only two of the 14 F&B directors had followed an organizational career path characterized by stable employment within one hotel chain (the first case being eight consecutive appointments with the Westin brand belonging to Starwood Hotels and Resorts Worldwide, Inc., and the second case being six consecutive appointments within brands belonging to Marriott International). This contrasted with Ladkin's (2002) finding that internal moves (54.7%) were more frequent than external moves (45.3%) in the climb to becoming a General Manager. The remaining 12 F&B directors in this sample of professional profiles were following an occupational career path characterized by mobility between hotel chains or companies. Among them, these F&B directors had worked for international brands for such international hotel chains Starwood, Intercontinental Hotel Group, Mandarin Oriental, Marriott, Hilton, Hyatt, Shangri-La, Accor, Kempinski, the Wyndham Hotel Group, and Banyan Tree. Among the 14 F&B directors in this sample, only the lone female no longer worked for an international brand, working instead for a domestic luxury resort hotel. Only the F&B director who began his career as a trainee chef, nonetheless, had extensive experience working for domestic hotel brands.

In addition to organizational mobility, the F&B directors' profiles also demonstrated geographic mobility. Ten of the F&B directors had worked in three or more cities within Mainland China, and two had worked in two cities (in one case, however, only for 8 months once, and in the other alternating between hotels in Beijing and Shanghai belonging to the same brand). Only two of the informants had spent their career to date in only one city in Mainland China (Shanghai and Tianjin respectively). Among the ten who had worked in multiple cities was the lone female F&B director. She was also one of the two F&B directors in the sample with overseas work experience as she had also worked for 24 months as a banquet supervisor after her graduation in London. As noted elsewhere, too, one F&B director had considerable working experience in Australia.

Last, the profiles were used to indicate how long the career path was from first appointment in the industry to the first appointment as F&B director in a hotel. The shortest time was 45 months for the graduate of Hong Kong Polytechnic University, and the longest time was 212 months. The average was 134.35 months, or a little over 11 years. This *average* figure, surprisingly, is in line with that noted earlier from the literature, although it does include periods of working experience that overlapped with formal education and training.

Career Insights For Career Guidance

The profiles differed in terms of depth and richness. In some instances, employment data were cursory, including only job titles, dates of employment, and the employing organizations. In other cases, though, the descriptions of positions held were rich, providing a relatively detailed picture of job responsibilities, achievements, honours and awards, and so provided significant insights into the professional development of F&B directors. Despite these limitations, the profiles demonstrated the different educational routes into hospitality management and the different pathways to the F&B directors' office that incumbents followed. The profiles showed the varied ways in which hotel food and beverage sector employees enter the sector, different job titles held at first appointment, as well as employee churn or turnover and the relative brevity of appointments within this division. The sample of profiles examined showed students that F&B directors can and do follow career paths other than that of continuous vertical promotion within the same organization. This was illustrated by the difference between the career path patterns of the 13 F&B directors whose careers have been in international hotel brands and that of the F&B director who began as a trainee chef, and whose career showed a greater range of experiences.

The profiles showed also the geographic and organizational mobility needs for career progression, and (for some) that promotion is not always upwards but also sideways. Finally, they demonstrated that individuals can, and do, cross industry sector boundaries (i.e., from hotels to private members club and events management/managed services).

Students noted, too, that some professional profiles included information on matters not covered here, such as skills possessed, languages spoken (and type and degree of fluency), professional development programs undertaken, and awards received. This illustrated to them that graduation from their present bachelor's degree program did not end their need for education and training in the industry.

Although all the profiles examined in this activity were of Mainland Chinese F&B directors and, thus, more relevant to Taiwanese students, non-Taiwanese students reported that the profiles studied alerted them to the different entry level positions and career path strategies possible in lodging management.

The use of the profiles alerted students to the fact that people progress within the industry in different ways and at different speeds, so that the examples in textbooks and elsewhere are illustrations and not blueprints for a lodging industry career.

Limitations Of This Approach

The first limitation in using publicly available profiles for career guidance in this project was my use of social networking profiles written in English only. Chinese-language profiles may suggest different career patterns. The second limitation was the absence of usable profiles of female F&B directors. I identified many female F&B directors with LinkedIn profiles but these public profiles did not meet the first criterion noted earlier. A third limitation was the difference in the completeness and richness of the LinkedIn profiles identified. Adopting a less stringent first criterion would have allowed the inclusion of incomplete profiles, where gaps might indicate, for example, periods of unemployment, and/or periods of education not elsewhere mentioned. A further limitation arises from the fact that social networking profiles, like résumés, are self-reports and thus suffer from the shortcomings associated with self-reported data, i.e., the prospect that the information is inaccurate or exaggerated.

The differences in working environments between East and West noted earlier could mean that experience in F&B operations is less important in career progress in China than elsewhere, as Li, Tse and Xie (2007) found for hotel general managers in Guangdong Province. Li et al. (2007) commented, however, the non-random nature of the sampling and their focus on Guangdong Province only.

Despite these limitations, I concluded that the social networking profiles of real, identifiable, industry executives could be a valuable source of information for parents and students examining career paths, progress, and expectations in hospitality management.

Implications For Practice

The use of social networking profiles can provide career guidance insights in a range of career-related matters for parents, potential students, and enrolled students at various stages of their academic career. Profiles from different hospitality and tourism sectors can extend the depth and breadth of insights and assist students in developing their own professional profiles. The use of such profiles in a range of courses, not only introductory and general courses but also courses related to, e.g., professional development, should be considered as a way of providing up-to-date information on career prospects. Students can be shown how to identify social networking profiles specific to different nationalities, locations, industries and occupations relevant to them.

Given that academics in Taiwan now provide continuous career counselling and mentoring to students from their freshman to their senior year, social networking profiles can provide real-life examples of traditional and non-traditional career paths within the hospitality and tourism industries. They present facts from which students may draw their own conclusions.

Conclusion

This was not a major project; nor is this a major paper. I aimed to provide insights into career progression in the lodging sector of the hospitality industry based on information derived from the social networking profiles of identifiable industry executives. The use of profiles illustrated a way of providing informative and relevant answers to the perennial questions asked by parents and potential students interested in, or enrolled in, degree programs in hospitality management about career prospects and career paths or lines of progression in the hospitality and lodging industries. The profiles demonstrated the varied paths that F&B directors follow, geographic and occupational mobility, and the fact that careers do not always begin "in college." Moreover, the information presented in the profiles showed how real individuals progressed within the lodging industry's career ladder (or competitive hierarchy). They served also to demonstrate a truth about career progression in the well-known proposition that "(1) some do, some don't; (2) the differences aren't very great; and (3) it's more complicated than that" (Berelson, 1979, p. 335).

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