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# the crew

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## REPORT



# You Rang?

*Life as a Modern Butler on the Seas.*



**How different is a modern butler from a chief stew? Peter Vogel assesses the parallels of a land-based butler to the life and work of the steward or stewardess aboard a yacht.**

**W**hen we think of a butler, for most of us our first thought is that of a cool, calm, collected and perhaps stuffy English person: witty, snobbish, discreet yet valued, dependable and intelligent. A know-it-all in the realm of etiquette, food, drink, silver and glassware. A butler understands the arts, culture and history. If they do not, then they convincingly pretended so.

The butler title originally applied to the person who had charge of the wine cellar and dispensed liquors, the name being derived from old French *bouteillier*, "bottle bearer". Today the term butler is not one that is easily defined; the responsibilities of private service persons working in these roles are quite varied. These can range from the "Man Friday" – a sole employee tending to the day to day needs of an employer whose role may involve housekeeping, light food preparation, walking the dog and doing the shopping – to a "butler supremo", who manages a team of staff (perhaps more than 100) and ensures everything is just as the employer wishes. If the

household is not too large, a butler will also act as a personal assistant and manage the accounts for the estate, otherwise the job will be divided and the administration side will fall to the estate manager. Parallels can be seen in the yachting industry when looking at the role of chief stew and purser.

Some may think of butlers firmly in the past, but as Robert Watson from The Guild Of Professional English Butlers states, "People are looking for someone who can come in, run their home, manage their lifestyle and take care of their investment; in other words, all the possessions and accoutrements they have amassed through their wealth. Many persons of considerable wealth have homes scattered around the globe and may own their own yacht. No matter where they are in the world, the level of service [provided] for themselves and their guests, should be the level of service they want."

In an age of "wow" factors, state-of-the-art decor, glorious locations and out-of-this-world cuisine, service can sometimes take a back seat. Regardless of how fantastic the food is or whom the chef used to work for, if the service is not what it should be, the owner and guests will notice. A well-trained interior is the vital key to success, whether you are on land or aboard a yacht.

Needs of owners and guests requiring private service have not changed from times of old. Procedures have evolved for both the stewardess and the butler today, and they are able to take full advantage of the technologies available – be that databases for inventories, accounting systems or the various mediums existing for effective means of communication. That said, people still eat, drink, sleep and essentially have the same expectations as yesteryear with the desired end result being that staff and

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crew are able to offer them outstanding service.

The management of yachts, however, is run differently to that of households. When a guest goes home, there is a routine and a butler caters to this. On yachts, many guests come for a holiday and want the same level of service and familiarity from home, yet expect variety and spontaneity. They want to entertain and be entertained. Film festival parties, barbecues on the beach, helicopters landings on glaciers, African tribal safari tours and volcano treks are just a few of the amazing guest experiences catered for.

In the “butling” world, as it is known, there appears to be a tremendous pride in the profession and loyalty to the owner. Throughout the years, a butler will continue to receive training and is aware of the standard operating procedures in place. In addition, longevity is apparent with butlers staying with the same employer for an average of six years. In yachting, this loyalty also exists but is overshadowed due to the transient nature of the service crew. In many cases, interior crewmembers leave yachts because they are not progressing in their career or given the training they require. Training is an essential tool to keep crew motivated, increases skills and also reduces employee turnover.

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Group communication skills are critical for success in both households and on yachts. Households require dedicated

cooperation and mutual respect amongst all of the staff, and the overall mission is highly dependent on this effective communication. It involves knowing both how and why people behave as they do. This principle is magnified on yachts as the living and working environment is more compact and subject to many different scenarios and outside influences. Long hours and personal relationships, both onboard and away from the yacht, may affect the performance of the crew, which in turn could affect the guests' onboard experience. It is imperative to have an understanding of the big picture in order to deal with any issues that come up in times of stress. Heads of department must all work together under the

coordination of the captain to ensure the smooth running of a yacht; crew management plays an integral part. In order to gain employment as a butler a certification from a butler academy is strongly recommended. In the yachting industry training and certification for captains, engineers and deckhands is required. All are aware that without proper training, attaining

the position they desire is virtually impossible; therefore career decisions are taken seriously. In yachting, many

interior jobs demand strong valet and impeccable table service skills as well as an overall expertise of interior management, just like we see in private households. However junior interior crew are often hired without any formal training and expected to perform a grand seven-star service for the owners and their guests.

For a steward(ess), a bubbly personality, killer smile and the right look may be all that is needed to get the job. Although harsh, this is often the reality of this industry. Many of those who currently fill these positions would like to excel further but have never had the opportunity to receive comprehensive training that encompasses the role of a steward(ess) in its entirety. Though it appears that hiring unskilled crew is a way to save money, it is proven in the long run to be counterproductive.

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The growing demand for butlers is not restricted to household service; there is an ever-increasing demand for the same service in the yachting industry. The question is whether supply can match demand. With the economy in its present state, competition for jobs has had a complete turnaround from previous years. Supply is much greater than the demand. In order for interior crew to stand out, it is not only about personality and a positive attitude. Knowledge and skills are what will set them apart and help establish a successful career in yachting.

*Peter Vogel is managing director of Triple S Consultancy. [www.triplesconsultancy.com](http://www.triplesconsultancy.com)*

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