



A Good Man Is Hard To Find

A leading family manager outlines strategies to avoid the pitfalls in seeking the perfect residential employee.

By Teresa Leigh

“He’s in love with the housekeeper!” were the first words I heard when I answered the phone. One of my clients was calling to give me feedback on a recent placement I had completed for her family. Her husband—both difficult to please and taciturn—was gushing with praise for the new housekeeper and the impact her presence and skills had on their quality of life and time spent at home.

If you’re thinking that the perfect domestic employee is easily located, vetted and employed simply by picking up the phone or paying a fee, you will be sorely disappointed in the outcome. Why? Because domestic staff are a completely different breed of employee. First and foremost, they are caregivers, responsible for nurturing the same individuals day in and day out. Second, they are self-motivated individuals capable of working in an isolated environment. They maintain the same high standards of performance with minimal supervision and even less interaction with their employers, colleagues or the outside world. Third, and most important, they have intimate access to your life. In an average workday these individuals come into contact with, and often handle, cherished possessions, personal information and other private, important and sensitive materials. In a nutshell, they have regular, unrestricted access to your sanctum sanctorum. That said, you want the best person for the job, not just a warm body.

So, how does one locate a domestic diva worthy of praise? There are several ways to source candidates,

each with their own benefits and disadvantages. You can leverage your own network of contacts, including family and friends, use the classified ads in newspapers and the Internet, hire a staffing agency or retain a family manager.

The demands placed on domestic staff create a unique set of challenges and requirements that most employers are not familiar with. There are five important considerations every hiring employer should be aware of:

- Risk—level of exposure to the criminal element
- Time—how long it takes to navigate the hiring process
- Proficiency—knowledge of and access to the private service work force
- Stewardship—oversight of the process, from applications to the filing of human resource documents and payroll
- ROI—the likelihood of achieving a successful outcome based on the combined elements of the hiring process

Overall, the goal is to identify a highly skilled and well-liked employee, one who will make an easy transition into their new position. And if all goes smoothly, who will go on to become a valued employee for years to come. Unfortunately that’s easier said than done, which is clear when we look at the experience of Madame Q.

Case Study

Madame Q is a vibrant, beautiful and widowed 68-

year old socialite living in an 8,000-square-foot home in the Georgetown neighborhood of Washington, D.C. In need of a competent head housekeeper, she gathered the names of some staffing agencies from publications and friends, scanned their Web sites and contacted two national agencies and one regional agency. She explained the scope of her needs, compensation package, benefits and time frame.

Many agencies finely tune their profiling process to test the range and complexity of needs initially presented by the client. As the agencies probed Madame Q for additional details and personal information the job description began to change, based on the focus and character of each conversation. As a result, by the end of the third conversation Madame Q was searching for an individual to fill the following roles: housekeeper, cook, event planner, dog walker, professional dresser and laundress. She also had unknowingly placed herself at risk by providing evidence of her wealth and lifestyle.

During the first nine weeks, Madame Q received paperwork on a total of 23 candidates, some delivered electronically, others faxed and the balance through regular and priority mail. The paperwork, at varying levels of completeness, differed by agency, making it difficult to compare candidates. The inconsistent process of sourcing candidates meant that a number of individuals were put forth who didn't meet the criteria outlined by Madame Q—some wouldn't relocate, others couldn't live in due to family responsibilities and several required a higher salary—which wasted the time of everyone involved. At that stage, a breadth of information about Madame Q and her family, including her summer and winter addresses, the names and ages of her children, their occupations and employers, the names and ages of her grandchildren, her dog's breed and name had been made available to three staffing agencies and their employees, 23 low-income candidates and countless others with proximity or relationships to the aforementioned individuals.

Furthermore, all of the agencies delegated to Madame Q the responsibilities of contacting and interviewing each candidate, filtering, evaluating and assessing each candidates' ability to fill the role, organizing and maintaining the application process and creating and presenting the compensation package.

Not unexpectedly, Madame Q was overwhelmed by the responsibility and allowed the search to lapse. After three months, she had not conducted any interviews or identified a single candidate that met her needs.

Broadly speaking, the process was not client-focused. More specifically, the failed search can be attributed to a number of issues:

- The compensation and benefits package was not reviewed in the context of the role, current market salaries and housing valuations.
- There was no written job description that all parties reviewed and approved.
- The search began without an on-site visit from an agency representative.
- Expectations about the employer's level of involvement were not communicated.
- There was no consultation or guidance about the viability of her requests, such as the availability of experienced dressers, an event planner's willingness to also provide

care to animals, etc.

Ultimately, a family management professional was retained to oversee the process for Madame Q. A family manager, also known as a private service specialist, a household manager or an estate manager, is a professional with expertise in the areas that constitute and support the lifestyles of the affluent. They are a low-profile group of individuals who balance the soft sciences of client service, personality assessment and negotiation with the uncompromising areas of skill development, schedule management and regulatory compliance. Family managers provide much more than domestic staff to their clients. They are trusted advisors who generally are involved in a broad range of household activities including: employee training; service agreement and contract management; vendor coordination; inventories; care and servicing calendars; household account management; kitchen and office organization; systems maintenance; and many other specialized services. This level of involvement gives them privileged insights into the client, allowing them to be both consultative and proactive. A family manager is a counselor, guardian and friend to the individuals and families with whom they work and their relationships often last for years—even decades.

Reaching Resolution

The family manager spent time with Madame Q to discuss her needs and inspect the environment an employee would be expected to become part of. Madame Q was asked to prioritize her requests, so they could be addressed in order of importance during the search and the option of outsourcing less-critical functions could be explored. The family manager then conducted a review and analysis of comparable roles and associated compensation to provide guidance to the client, with the goal of finalizing a detailed job description and a realistic salary package. After those two items were in place, the search began.

The family manager interviewed 26 candidates at a neutral location and narrowed the pool of potential employees to three. The next stage included a skills assessment via telephone and a criminal background check that had to be passed satisfactorily in order to have a second face-to-face meeting with the family manager. The second meeting took several hours and the candidates were compensated, to demonstrate a commitment to the position and respect for their time and expertise. Each candidate was asked to arrive in uniform or professional dress, to make a bed, set a bathroom and iron a shirt, role play hypothetical scenarios and finally, presented with a job description. Madame Q was given the option of participating in the second meeting or conducting a separate interview on her own.

At this stage, none of the candidates had received any personal specifics on Madame Q, helping keep exposure to a minimum. Madame Q met with the candidates only after a significant filtration process had been completed, allowing the time she devoted to the search to be both brief and effective. The family manager and Madame Q conferred after the interviews, carefully reviewing the strengths and weaknesses of each individual, and together decided on B. The family manager worked closely with B to address her questions and concerns

and provide a formal orientation. The family manager also handled all human resources documentation and payroll initiation to get the new arrangement off to a smooth start for both B and Madame Q. Four years later, they are still together.

In short, the family manager's level of expertise in the field of private service staffing aids in the overall process. However, the degree of experience and comfort a family manager has in working with very wealthy clientele cannot be overlooked as a significant asset. The high-net-worth are a unique client base

that requires special care and handling—creating and supporting a lifestyle that the average person will only dream about takes a specific skill set and knowledge. It is this aptitude that makes family managers such a valuable resource to their affluent clients and to other types of professionals working with or targeting this coveted market segment. *RL*

Teresa Leigh is a 24-year veteran of the private service industry and a recognized expert in the field of family management.

Methods For Finding Domestic Help				
	Contacts	Solicitation	Agencies	Family Manager
Risk	<p>HIGH</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Contingent upon security clearance, background checks and skill set verification of candidates Exposure of household and family Transfer of knowledge or gossip from one household to another, familiarity with other staff members Total loss of anonymity 	<p>HIGH</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Contingent upon security clearance, background checks and skill set verification of unknown candidates Heightened exposure of household and family Complete loss of anonymity Exposure to an unknown element 	<p>MEDIUM to HIGH</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Contingent upon security clearance, background checks and skill set verification of unknown candidates; agency's do not often vet their candidates Exposure level of self and family Complete loss of anonymity Exposure to an unknown element 	<p>LOW</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Zero exposure level: candidates are vetted prior to any face-to-face meetings with clients Complete anonymity
Time	<p>HIGH</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Hundreds of hours of your personal time to source, interview, select, hire and integrate this new employee into your household Personally interviewing each candidate increases personal exposure 	<p>HIGH</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Hundreds of hours of your personal time to source, interview, select, hire and integrate this new employee into your household Personally Interviewing each candidate increases personal exposure 	<p>HIGH</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Hundreds of hours of your personal time to review the candidates forwarded to you by agency Must personally interview each candidate 	<p>VARIABLE</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Dictated by the request for staff
Proficiency	<p>LOW</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Expertise in this field Knowledge of documents to be collected Experience highly affects both time and risk 	<p>LOW to MEDIUM</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Expertise in this field Cost can be high and there is no guarantee of any return on investment Knowledge of documents to be collected Experience highly affects both time and risk 	<p>LOW to MEDIUM</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Contingent upon their expertise in this field and knowledge of documents to be collected Experience highly affects both time and risk 	<p>HIGH</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Expert in the field of domestic staffing Even higher if family manager has worked as private household staff Communication and negotiation skills Role as human resource liaison: creating household HR files Salary and benefit negotiations
Stewardship	<p>LOW</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Processing of, and access to, criminal and credit background information Forms to be used for the human resource areas Compliance to state and federal guidelines 	<p>LOW</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Processing of, and access to, criminal and credit background information Forms to be used for the human resource areas Documents to be collected Compliance to state and federal guidelines 	<p>LOW</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Processing of, and access to, criminal and credit background information Forms to be used for the human resource areas Documents to be collected Compliance to state and federal guidelines 	<p>HIGH</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develops plan of action Criminal and background checks done before meetings take place All forms to be used for human resource areas provided Documents completed before candidates are interviewed Provides information on compliance to state and federal guidelines Provides each client with all documents for employee personnel file Provides detailed job descriptions, confidentiality, NDA, and salary negotiations Conducts tests verifying candidates' skill sets
ROI	<p>LOW</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Average likelihood of success coupled with substantial time requirements and high risk 	<p>LOW</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Low likelihood of success with substantial time requirements and extremely high risk 	<p>LOW to MEDIUM</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Likelihood of success and degree of risk is entirely contingent on firm selection 	<p>HIGH</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Likelihood of success is increased due to expertise, client's time is leveraged
Success Rate	VARIABLE	LOW	VARIABLE	CONSISTENT